David Graeber

LOST PEOPLE

Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar



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For my mother, who wished to live long enough
to see this book come out.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

When I went to Madagascar, I took with me a lot of Dostoevsky: *The Prince, The Brothers Karamazov, Notes from Underground,* and various collections (there was also some Gogol and Pynchon, but it was mostly Dostoevsky). I think this is one reason this book is so long. I didn't really notice at the time, but much later, Dale Pesmen remarked to me that my portrait of Ratsizafy in chapter 9 bore a striking resemblance to Dostoevsky's character studies. After some contemplation, I realized, yes, actually, what I've written here could be considered a kind of cross between an ethnography and a long Russian novel.

At the time I was writing, I just thought I was trying to write a dialogic ethnography. It had always irritated me in the 1980s and early '90s that you saw so many monologues about why anthropologists should be more dialogic. "Why don't they just shut up," I'd ask, "and *write* a dialogic ethnography?" At the time, Bakhtin had just been rediscovered by the American academy. Dialogism was all the rage. I had read *Rabelais and His World,* and a host of books and essays by and about Bakhtin but for some reason I'd never actually read Bakhtin's book about Dostoevsky, where he really lays down his pragmatic analysis of dialogic writing. Instead, I unconsciously cut back to the source.

The result is a book in large part about character. For one thing, it's full of characters: both in the sense of eccentrics and oddballs, and also in the sense of protagonists of stories. This means it's also about the edges between politics and history, places where the tacit horizons of everyday life are always being challenged and negotiated on a daily basis, and therefore, where new things can emerge. After all, stories about such anomalous characters are both the main way we define what we consider normal, and also a reservoir of possibilities during moments of change. But it's also about character in the more conventional sense: what people are made of, their personal and moral qualities.

Of course there are many ways to be dialogic. Most ethnographies are at the very least in dialogue with other scholars in the discipline. Mine might be considered somewhat lacking in this regard. Certainly there is some of this, but I did not write as an intervention in any particular current debates, whether in anthropology, Malagasy studies, or anything else. The theory (except, arguably, at the end) is entirely idiosyncratic and follows my own concerns. Some thought this unwise. Here my thesis advisor, Marshall Sahlins, was quite understanding and supportive. "But of course," he said, paraphrasing Thucydides. "You are writing a jewel for all times." There was a bit of an irony, certainly, since he was in the middle of writing an essay making fun of Thucydides for saying this, but then, he also knew we were all still reading Thucydides 2500-odd years later, so it was hard to take it as anything but reassurance. At any rate I am certainly very glad I did not frame this book as an intervention in some current debate because had I done so, it would never have been published. As it was, it took several years to write, and about a decade to publish. In the intervening time, there have been some fascinating studies—Jennifer Cole's on the Betsimisaraka that touches on related themes of memory and violence, Sandra Evers' on slavery in southern Betsileo—that would have been quite exciting to bounce off of this one. But all that will have to wait. Instead I have simply added more recent references that I think the interested reader might wish to follow up and largely left it at that. It seemed more honest to leave the book as a dialogue with those with whom I was really in dialogue at the time I wrote it, rather than patching in occasional paragraphs pretending I had been in dialogue with someone else.

I did find myself a little disturbed, in the course of writing, with some of the imperatives of academic production. The standard, nowadays, is that a monograph should be both ethnographic and a work of theory, and at the same time, organized around a single major point or argument. I was continually being advised to reorganize the book in this way. Why don't you broaden its appeal, colleagues told me, by making it a book about the crisis of the state in Africa? It should be a book about the weight of the past. It should be a book about slavery. The advice was nothing if not well-intended and made a great deal of sense considering the fact that most academic books sell copies largely when they are assigned in courses, but it always sat uneasily on me. It seemed somehow to do a kind of violence to the experience. It's all a little reminiscent of arguments that, say, Balinese culture is "about" hierarchy or ritual or somesuch. Nonsense! A culture isn't "about" anything. It's about

everything. People don't live their lives to prove some academic's point. The ambition of ethnography used to be—at least, I always thought it was—to describe or at least give access to a universe, a total way of life. While this might seem, in retrospect, to have been a bit overweening and simplistic, it seems at least more respectful than reducing the lives of one's former friends to illustrations of a single theoretical argument. Obviously, the book is hardly lacking in theoretical arguments, but I like to think they arise in dialogue with my interlocutors in Madagascar. The only one that doesn't, in fact, a theory about narrative I hatched while working in the archives in the capital, is there mainly to be shot down when I start listening to the stories people actually tell (though I do think it's an interesting theory in itself.)

Let me turn to acknowledgments.

First of all, I must thank the editor, Rebecca Tolen, for being so patient with me, and for contributing so much to bringing this into being. Sometimes I think editors should be listed as co-authors. Instead, their names often do not appear anywhere in the book at all. Also Kristi Long who helped immeasurably in straightening the manuscript out.

Let me list some others, students, colleagues, and friends who have contributed in one way or another to its creation: Maureen Anderson, Nina Bhatt, Maurice Bloch, Richard Burger, Alain Caille, Durba Chattaraj, Jennifer Cole, John Comaroff, Jean Comaroff, Jennifer Dragon, Sandra Evers, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, Magnus Fiskesjö, Thomas Hansen, Laurie Hart, Joseph Hill, Jennifer Jackson, Ivan Karp, Pier Larson, Michael Lambek, Nhu Thi Le, Moon-Hee Lee, Lauren Leve, Enrique Mayer, Wyatt MacGaffey, Christina Moon, Dale Pesman, Ilona Raitsimring, Elie Rajaonarison, Jean-Aime Rakotoarisoa, Jacques Rakotonaivo, Curtis Renoe, Mieka Ritsema, Stuart Rockefeller, Marshall Sahlins, Ariane Schulz, Michael Silverstein, Raymond T. Smith, Terence Turner, David Watts, Hylton White, Zhen Zhang, everyone at the Arsivam-Pirenena, especially Nico, whom I miss enormously, Chantal and Patricia and Parson and all my other self-appointed research assistants, everyone mentioned in this book, especially of course the families of Armand and Miadana, but really everyone. The book itself is meant to stand as thanks, tribute, and testimonial: it was for you, to try to preserve something of the integrity of your perspectives, as I perceived it, that I was willing to fight so long to keep the book in its present form.

Notes on Malagasy Pronunciation

Generally speaking, Malagasy, of the sort spoken around Arivonimamo, is pronounced not too differently from English (Malagasy speakers often say that English pronunciation is much easier for them than French). However, there are a number of differences:

o is pronounced "oo" as in book

ao is pronounced "o" as in "owe"

ia is pronounced "ee" as in "seen"

ai is pronounced "i" as in "high"

Unstressed "o"s and "i"s are often unpronounced, and terminal "a"s may or may not be, so that **andriana,** for example, is often pronounced "andreen." Some other differences:

h is usually not pronounced in the Merina dialect, or is very muted

j is pronounced "dz", as in "adze"

g is always hard, as in "goat"

Also, if an **i** precedes a **k,** that k is followed by a "y" sound: "ikala" (girl) is pronounced "ikyala."

The combination **tra** can often become a "tch" sound, so that **satroka** ("hat") is pronounced "satch-ka", and **mahafinaritra** ("pleasant, pleasurable") is pronounced "maf-natch."

LOST PEOPLE

BETAFO, 1990

1

I was first drawn to Betafo because people there didn't get along. Many of its inhabitants were practically not on speaking terms with one another. Now, it is a notorious thing in Madagascar that when a community is divided in this way, no one wants to talk about it. Certainly, not to outsiders. Rather than trying to win them over to their own side's perspective, people are much more likely to see the whole situation as shameful for all involved. When dealing with outsiders, the impulse is always to emphasize the solidarity of one's community, so as to gain a kind of moral authority that comes from embodying it; when that solidarity clearly does not exist—as in Betafo—people retreat into silence.

In Betafo they didn't do that. Or at least, among the first handful of people I met from Betafo, there were several more than willing to talk about its conflicts. Mainly because, for one reason or another, they wished to rise above them. And while they always remained the people I knew best, once a wall of silence cracks it tends to collapse entirely; once word gets around that someone has been talking, then everyone starts to think perhaps it would be better to make sure their own perspective gets a hearing, too. Anyway, so it was in Betafo.

The first person I met from Betafo was named Armand Rabearivelo. At the time I was living in Arivonimamo, a town of about ten thousand people, where Armand was known as the man who trucked in bananas from the coast. He supplied most of the vendors in and around town. Two or three of his employees were usually to be seen in the marketplace, in front of a vast pile of bananas, young men unusual for their red berets and military-style clothing. I should explain here that roughly a third of the population in this part of Madagascar were called *olona mainty,* "black people"—supposedly

more African than the "white" majority,[1] and mostly made up of the descendants of nineteenth century slaves. Unlike most other black people in rural Imerina, Armand and his workers affected a style that recalled something of the African Nationalist posture popular in the capital in the late '70s and early '80s, mixed with the more generic idiom of the Third World Revolutionary. They listened to reggae and funk music; Armand, tall, slightly bearded, with a swagger (at least, by Malagasy standards it was a swagger) that was tempered by his obvious good nature, was a prime mover in local left-wing politics.

Armand saw himself as rising above the divisions in Betafo partly because he saw himself as an actor in a much larger world. He was a man of humble origins who had worked his way through college; for all the Africanist posturing, he ultimately saw those divisions—largely, divisions between black and white—as simple racism, the result of rural ignorance and narrow-mindedness: the very thing which reasonable people should unite to overcome. This, anyway was what I was eventually to discover, because Armand and his wife, Nety, eventually became good friends of mine. At first, though, I only knew him because of my friend Ramose Parson.

Parson was a biology teacher at the Catholic High School, and his wife had a *hotely,* a booth where she sold food in the marketplace. During my first two months in Arivonimamo I used to hang around there all the time. Armand was an old drinking buddy of Parson, and would often drop by in the afternoons when he was finished with business and had nothing else to do.

At that time I was gathering oral histories in the region surrounding Arivonimamo, Parson often accompanying me. On hearing of my project, Armand immediately volunteered to take us to Betafo, where, he said, there was a notable *andriana*—a royal ancestor—named Andrianamboninolona, whose descendants still occupied the place today.

Everyone assumed that *andriana* were intrinsically interesting. The hills were dotted with royal tombs, sites of curing and pilgrimage. But "*andriana*" also had a broader meaning. It referred not only to kings or royal ancestors, but it was also used to refer to their present-day descendants. Of the "white" population, about a third were themselves *andriana* (the rest were referred to as *hova,* or commoners.) The factions in Betafo were not just "white" and "black," they were seen much more as a matter of nobles and their former slaves.

As a result, Armand ended up taking us to talk to two different people.

We went first to a hamlet called Morafeno to talk to a black person, one of Armand's own relatives, a very old and rather eccentric astrologer named Ratsizafy; only afterwards did he take us to speak with a representative of the *andriana*, the *President Fokontany*,[2] in the nearby village of Belanitra. Now, even at the time, it did strike me that the president seemed nervous about something. Not that I thought much about it: perhaps he was just a shy person, or found my presence intimidating. Anyway he seemed to loosen up considerably as time went on. After a while, all of us—Armand, Parson, the president, and myself—ended up walking together to the ancient village of Betafo, its center now largely abandoned and overgrown. We gazed admiringly into the vast moat-like ditches that surrounded the village, admired the stonework of some fallen pillars in the remains of a ruined mansion just outside it (I made sketches), inspected the ancestor's large white tomb inside. It was a pleasant visit, informative enough as such visits went, but I had no idea of the undercurrents running beneath it all.

Which was, no doubt, what everyone would really have preferred.

Or—not quite everyone. I should make a confession here. Actually, the president had every reason to be nervous, seeing me walk in with Armand, fresh from a visit with Ratsizafy. No doubt he spent the first hour or so of our meeting hoping I wouldn't ask him who Ratsizafy was, or about anything he had told me; and when he became more relaxed, it was only because I never did. This was not surprising, considering I hadn't really understood much of what Ratsizafy said. When I had met him, he was coming back from the fields, with a spade over his shoulder and a wool cap on his head, drinking rum from a hip-flask; I turned on my tape recorder by a tree and he began to tell us stories in an old, cracked voice, talking mainly to Armand and not to me, softly at first, more and more forceful as he consumed the additional rum we'd offered him but also a lot more slurred. (At the very end, caught in a sweeping gesture, he tripped and fell over. "Oh, he's all right," said Armand, as I moved to help him up, "it happens all the time. He's used to it.") To be honest I had no idea what the story was even supposed to be about. It was only when Parson and I began trying to decode the recording later that I began to realize how interesting it really was.

But what really made up my mind to concentrate on Betafo was when I met a woman named Miadana.

I first met her completely by accident. Together with another friend from

town, Chantal, I had wandered into Betafo on the first day of the lunar new year. This is a day marked all over Imerina (indeed, all over Madagascar) by rituals called *fanasinana,* and Armand had assured us that Ratsizafy always celebrated it by sacrificing a sheep (or at least a chicken), and that while Armand himself couldn't make it, Ratsizafy would in no way mind if we sat in. Unfortunately, the message reached me somewhat secondhand—or, maybe it was just another example of my still uncertain command of the language—because when I set off that morning all that I was completely sure of was that I was going to Betafo to see some *fanasinana.*

So, around 10 AM I was standing once again in the overgrown and largely abandoned center of Betafo, with Chantal, near the tomb of the *andriana* ancestor, wondering why the place looked as deserted as ever, cursing myself for being so stupid as to follow advice that I had obviously not even understood instead of simply going to the top of one of the famous mountains near Arivonimamo—where there were sure to be lots of people sacrificing—staring at the stump of my cigarette and wondering whether it would be all right to just throw it in the grass. Or were we just in the wrong part of Betafo? (In fact we were. Ratsizafy was off sacrificing in Morafeno. I never found that out till much later, however.) There were three houses near us. Two, traditional two-story red clay houses with high-pitched thatch roofs, looked empty. In one, more modern looking, there were signs of life. We came to the door, called *hody-o!,* and a woman emerged: thin-faced, about forty-five, with a guarded intelligent manner and one crooked tooth that jutted extravagantly from the corner of her mouth. She listened silently as we tried to explain that I was doing research on Malagasy history and customs, that we had actually been here before, once, but that we had heard there was supposed to be this ritual going on today, though it didn't seem there actually was one, and if she knew anything about this we would certainly be obliged, or if not, as seemed likely, we were sorry to bother her and would just be on our way.

"Well, I don't know anything about *fanasinana,*" she said, "but I could tell you something about history. Come inside."

Inside was a large room with a double bed and several rattan chairs. The woman, Miadana, shooed away a couple of chickens that had wandered in from the yard, introduced us to her husband, son, and daughter, sent the daughter off to the kitchen to make us coffee, and began to narrate the history of Betafo. For the next two hours or so, she talked almost continually.

She told us about the origins of the local *andriana* (her family was *andriana*, these being the nobles whose ancestors first founded the community), described traditional customs and taboos. It was a very traditional community. There was no end to customs and taboos. Her family systematically violated them. We break all the ancestral customs, she said. We've only been living here five years now, we're still used to the life of the capital—to living like normal people—and all of a sudden we're supposed to completely give up eating onions and garlic? But of course, one has to be secretive about these things. If you grow garlic, you have to grow flowers around them to disguise the smell. People are always scolding us, threatening to tell Ratsizafy, but no one's ever caught us red-handed. And she also intimated something else. These aren't really ancestral customs, she said. Not ours, anyway. Really, all this fuss about taboos was part of a game played by Ratsizafy and his cohorts, a way of intimidating the *andriana* and making their lives more difficult.

Before I go any further let me remark that Miadana was a stupendous verbal performer. Also, a very enthusiastic one. During this first meeting—during which she incidentally never even stopped to ask me who I was and why I was interested in Betafo—her husband, a handsome man of maybe fifty, remained almost completely silent. Occasionally, he would try to throw in some gruff comment or to answer one of our questions, but only to be immediately overwhelmed by Miadana's flow of words. It didn't seem to bother him particularly. But for me, the effect was almost surreal, because one thing I had consistently noticed in rural Imerina was that women *always* deferred to men when it comes to the telling of history. I had even seen mothers insist I interview their sons—and then proceed to coach them when they made mistakes. Miadana seemed entirely unaware of this convention. Even more odd, when now and then she got stuck for a name or a date, she would always turn to her twelve-year-old son (actually he was fifteen, but I thought he was twelve at the time—he had a baby face) who would then, in a slightly bored tone of voice, supply it: "It was 1931, mom."

I suppose I could have written this family off as eccentrics, anomalies, misplaced members of an educated elite entirely unrepresentative of the community around them. Instead, my main thought was that I really liked them. Perhaps it was Miadana's way of immediately making me feel complicit in transgression, perhaps it was her sense of humor, or the fact that she so obviously *wanted* to talk to me, to talk about things others preferred not to. But

when she urged me to come back soon, I decided that she meant it, so I did. Before long I was a regular visitor.

Nety, Armand's wife, had only good things to say about Miadana and her family. They were decent people who wanted to get along with everyone; it wasn't their fault that so many of their neighbors wouldn't have anything to do with them. It was typical of the tensions in Betafo, Nety said: their neighbors were black people, Miadana was white. Nety herself seemed genuinely depressed by the whole business. I remember once a man named Desi, an *andriana* from the village of Belanitra (where I had met the *President Fokontany*), came to visit Armand on some minor business. Armand was out, Nety invited him in but Desi preferred to hover outside the door for twenty minutes or so until her husband showed up. "That's what those people from Belanitra are like," she told me afterward. "Perfectly polite: they'll always say hello, exchange pleasantries. But then that's it. You never feel you could really get to know them."

Armand's opinion was that the tensions in Betafo had not been going on for very long. When he was growing up, Betafo was a really strong, solidary community. It was only since he had come back from college, really, that it had gotten to the point where people in the northern and southern halves of the *fokontany* wouldn't even invite each other to weddings and funerals. The definitive break had only happened about three years before.

This was an opinion I would hear repeated quite frequently over the next year or so, during which time I became more and more immersed in the affairs of Betafo. Most people, in fact, were willing to be even more precise. The definitive break occurred in 1987, during a communal ordeal that ended in disaster. Over and over, I heard the story of the disastrous ordeal of 1987. In its own way, it served as a charter for the rupture of the community: though the fault lines had been evident long before, it marked the point where no one could any longer deny them.

It was Miadana herself who told me the story the first time, during our first meeting, though I had little idea of its import at the time. The basics of the story were this: there had been a spate of robberies in the community of Betafo. The *fokon'olona*—the communal assembly—decided to hold a collective ordeal, which was a way of invoking the power of the ancestors to punish whoever was responsible. The usual practice was to have everyone drink some water which had been mixed with earth taken from the ancestral tomb. But there was a

problem. The inhabitants of Betafo were of two different ancestries. So they took dust from the tombs of both major ancestors and mixed them together. Mixing them, however, turned out to be a terrible mistake.

Here is her own first account of the affair:

> Miadana: There was a time here when there was lots of petty thievery: if there was manioc growing in the fields, if there was corn growing in the fields, then there would be someone stealing it. So "we'll hold an ordeal," they said. They were going to hold an ordeal. So over in Belanitra—you know where that is? There's a fokontany office in town there, and everyone, the entire community all gathered together there. And they took a bowl and put water in it. They got some dust from here, and someone else went to get dust from over there [pointing northeast]—because there's a tomb up there, too.[3]

That is, one of the people organizing the ceremony collected dust from around the *andriana* tomb in the center of the Betafo [a few yards from the house where Miadana was telling me this] while another went across the rice fields to a hill to the northeast, where the ancestor of Ratsizafy, the astrologer, was buried, and got some there. Generously, Miadana allows Ratsizafy's claim that his ancestor was some kind of *andriana* as well:

> Miadana: Now, that one: that too is the tomb of an *andriana*; it belongs to the people from Morafeno. But you know, the two of them were rivals. That is to say: the *andriana* who lived here, and the one who lived over there. They were opponents. Rivals.
>
> So they took the bowl of water and dropped some gold into it. Gold. Then they took the dust from here and the dust from there, and when they'd added that the people all lined up. One by one, each was taken up and given a spoonful of the water to drink.
>
> And each drank it, saying as they did, "We drink this water, so that if it was ever I who stole, if it was ever I who did this, if it was ever I who did that, then let those two ancestors kill me on the spot," as it would be both the two ancestors who would—how do you say?—who'd smite them.
>
> So, "What," you say, "happened next?"
>
> It was summertime. It was the middle of summer. And according to the belief around here, both of these ancestors were of *andriana* status—but the two of them had been chasing each other around constantly in the past. They both used to live here, you know, but then there was a fight, and one was defeated and left. And later his children made those tombs.
>
> David: What was his name?
>
> Miadana: Rainitamaina. From Morafeno. Nowadays they have their tomb way over there; they don't come around here any more.
>
> David: And he and Andrianamboninolona, were they related?
>
> Miadana: There was some slight relationship. But . . . they didn't get along, and the one was defeated and driven away. He left.

> But despite that, during that ordeal, they combined the two. After all that happened, they were combined. During the ordeal.
>
> "So what happened then?"
>
> Now, I don't know if this was really true, or just a coincidence—I have no idea. But this is what happened:
>
> It was summertime, like it is now, and the rain was due. The rice: the rice had all been harvested. It started raining, hard. And the rice belonging the people who had called the ordeal was . . . it was . . .
>
> The rice belonging to the person from Morafeno was all swept away. *Carried* away by the rainwater. It went all the way down to Ambodivona—and only his! [laughs] It was *really* funny. Really really funny. All the rice he'd harvested wound up down there—more than a kilometer away! And what? So they started asking: "So how come all of our rice got carried down into the fields by the water, but your rice didn't get carried off, none of your rice was carried off at all?" And some people said: "Yeah, well, didn't you put people who didn't get along together in the same bowl?" The rain came. "And wouldn't it be carried away by the rain?"
>
> So it was obvious what had happened. And from then on there haven't been any more ordeals. Not any more.

The "person from Morafeno" is again, the aged astrologer Ratsizafy. He and an *andriana* named Sely, one of Miadana's neighbors, had been the main organizers of the ceremony. When the rains struck,[4] then, they struck only the rice of those two men—the men responsible for having mixed the two ancestors together.

The more I learned about these ancestors, the less surprising it seemed that they should have been irate at having been combined together in one bowl. In fact, I began to wonder how it could ever have occurred to anyone to mix them in the first place. Even in death, they were actively hostile: veritable icons of hostility. One—the ancestor of the black people—was said to have fought a magical battle against the *andriana*, who tried to enslave him (this was the story Ratsizafy was trying to tell me, that first day). To this day, he is said to be so bitter about the whole affair that his tomb cannot be opened without hanging a cloth across the door, because if he catches sight of the village of Betafo again, whirlwinds strike the town. At the same time, I was told that if a black person so much as touches the tomb next to Miadana's house, guns go off inside. Ratsizafy himself—though he had spent his entire life in Betafo—has never been known to set foot in that quarter of the village.

Anyway, the ordeal set off a whole chain of events, a rapid polarization in which the ancestors appeared to become an active force in tearing the community apart. Miadana implied so much herself when she ended the story by

telling us how most black people (who constituted the vast majority of the population of the north half of the *fokontany*, mostly living just a stone's throw away nearer to the rice fields) began to follow Ratsizafy's example and avoided the central area, with its hostile tomb, entirely.[5]

> Miadana: And after a while, no one came up here any more, either. That is to say: no longer would people come through here, they would go around on that lower road instead. [softly] There are people saying that we're mean, but we really aren't mean!

About six months later, Sely—one of the two organizers of the ordeal, the noble one—suddenly fell even more afoul of this same ancestor. He was struck by an economic catastrophe; within the space of months, he went from being one of the richest men in Betafo to a landless, penniless pauper. He had offended Andrianamboninolona, people said, by marrying a woman descended from slaves, and as a result lost everything. Though, some added that his downfall did also have a more immediate cause in the machinations of his rivals, including, in fact, the astrologer himself. If nothing else, those rivals were certainly the ones to profit by it. They ended up with almost all his land; and this, in turn, became the flash point around which long-standing resentments about the gradual encroachment of former slaves on noble property exploded into outright hostility between the two sides. The ordeal, in other words, was taken to presage what happened in its wake; it was proof that it was impossible to join two such ancestries together in a single community. By crystallizing tensions that had long existed, on a more covert level, in a form that could be made completely public, the story could both make it easier for people to act on them, and afterwards, imply those actions were inevitable.

But why should a flash flood have become the point around which a community breaks apart? To ask such a question is, ultimately, to ask a question about history. To answer it, one would have to understand how people like Armand, Ratsizafy, Miadana, and their neighbors imagine their place in society: who or what they feel they represent and who represents them, their origins and destinies, and the moral stakes that are at play. It is to ask what kind of actions they consider to be politically significant, or for that matter—as the example of the feuding ancestors implies—what sorts of being constitute politically significant actors, along with a whole host of other questions about power, authority, action, justice, value. It would be an enormous undertaking. This is what I am going to try to do.

Before delving into these questions, however, it would be useful to draw back a step first and explain what brought me to Arivonimamo in the first place, what sort of community Betafo was, and a little about what sort of fieldwork I ended up conducting there.

Arivonimamo and Betafo

I arrived in Madagascar on June 16, 1989. For the first six months I was there, I lived in Antananarivo, the capital, studying the language and doing archival research. The National Archives in Antananarivo are a remarkable resource. In their collection are thousands of documents from the nineteenth century kingdom of Madagascar, most from the highland province of Imerina, which surrounded the capital. Almost all of it was in Malagasy. I went through hundreds of folders, carefully copying out everything concerned with the district of Eastern Imamo, the part of Imerina in which I intended to work. Eastern Imamo seemed, at the time, to have been a rather sleepy place, a rural hinterland far from the tumultuous political struggles of the capital, but at the same time insulated from the unstable fringes of Imerina, half-empty territories full of raiding bandits, industrial projects, and periodic revolts. It was a place where not much ever happened—and thus, the perfect field on which to study the slow-moving processes of social and cultural change I was interested in. What had attracted me to Eastern Imamo, in other words, was almost exactly the opposite of what attracted me to Betafo.

Once I felt I had a minimal command of Malagasy, I set out for Arivonimamo, the major town of the region. It was not at all difficult to get there: Arivonimamo is only an hour from the capital by car. Before long I had established myself in town, and had begun making regular trips to the surrounding countryside, gathering oral histories, keeping an eye out for a likely place to do more detailed research.

Arivonimamo is a town of some ten thousand people that clusters around a stretch of the main highway leading west from the capital. In the 1960s and '70s, it had been the home of the national airport, which sat in a broad valley to the south of town; but though the airport brought money and employment, it never seemed to become an integral part of the town's economy. It was largely a thing grafted on. The road from the airport did not pass through Arivonimamo itself; there wasn't even a place for travelers to spend the night there. In 1975, the airport was replaced by another, nearer the capital;[6] by

1990, all that remained to show it had once been there was the battered plywood shell of an empty restaurant, standing where the airport road merges with the highway just on the outskirts of town.

The current town centers on a taxi station, a wide asphalt expanse flanked by two great churches, Catholic and Protestant. At most hours, it was crowded with vans and station wagons filling up with passengers and bags and crates and heading off the capital, or further west down the highway. On the southern edge of the taxi stand is a wide spreading *amontana* tree, a very ancient sycamore that is considered the symbolic center of the town, the mark that it was once the place of kings. To its north is a marketplace with food stands and red-tiled arcades, which every Friday fills to overflowing with rural people and vendors under white umbrellas. The town itself clings to the road (only there is there electricity); its houses are mostly two or three stories, with graceful pillars supporting verandahs around the second floor, and high-pitched roofs of tin or tile.

Arivonimamo is the capital of an administrative district of the same name. It contains several government offices and three high schools: one state school (CEG), one Catholic lycée, and one Protestant one. There is a clinic and, on a high bluff somewhat to the west of town, a small prison. Together with a gendarmes' barracks nearer the old airport, a post office, and a bank, these constitute the government presence. There was once a factory nearby but it had been abandoned for years by the time I was there; no one I knew was quite sure what, if anything, had ever been produced there. The town's commercial economy fell almost completely outside the formal (taxed, regulated) sector: there was a pharmacy and two large general stores, but that was about it. Otherwise, the population conformed to the general rule for Malagasy towns: almost everybody grows food; everybody sells something. Streets were fringed with dozens of little booths and stores, all stocked with the same narrow range of products: soap, rum, candles, cooking oil, biscuits, soda, bread. Anyone who had a car was a member of the taxi collective; anyone who had a VCR was a theater operator; anyone who had a sewing machine was a manufacturer of clothing.

The province of Imerina has always centered on the gigantic irrigated plains surrounding the capital, Antananarivo, which have long had a very dense population and been the center of powerful kingdoms. In the nineteenth century, the Merina kingdom conquered most of Madagascar; since the French conquest of 1895, Antananarivo has remained the center of administration,

and the surrounding territory remains the ancestral lands of most of Madagascar's administrators and educated elite. The territory that now makes up the district of Arivonimamo was always somewhat marginal. It was late to be incorporated into the kingdom, and it was never more than weakly integrated into the networks of cash and patronage centered on the capital. So it remains. Now, as then, it is a political and economic margin, a place where not much ever happens.

To the north of Arivonimamo is a rolling country of endless red hills, some covered only with grass, others wooded with eucalyptus trees, stretches of *tapia*—which look like dwarf oaks—and occasional stands of pine. The hills are cut by narrow twisting valleys, each carefully terraced for the cultivation of irrigated rice. Here and there rise granite mountains, supposed to have been the seats of ancient kings.

In this back country, there are no paved roads. People walk—very few can afford bicycles. Goods are transported in ox-carts, along mud paths that are, even in winter, too rutted for any but the toughest automobiles. With the start of the summer rains, they become impassable. It is largely because of the difficulties of communication that there is no large-scale commercial agriculture, despite the proximity of the capital. Farmers do end up carting a fair proportion of their crops to markets in town, and much of this ends up helping to feed the population of Antananarivo, but it's all piecemeal, individual cultivators selling to very small-scale merchants in an endless multitude of tiny transactions, almost as if people were intentionally trying to ensure that the meager profits to be had from buying and selling local products ended up divided among as many hands as possible.

Betafo lies along the southern flank of a long mountainous ridge called Ambohidraidimby, most of it only a thirty to forty minutes' walk from the center of Arivonimamo. It is close enough that one can live in town and still cultivate one's fields in Betafo—as many people do—or have a house in both places and move freely back and forth between them. Armand's family took the latter course: usually about half of them were to be found in Betafo at any given time, the rest in town or elsewhere. At any rate, it is not an isolated place.

Now, when I say "Betafo," I am not referring merely to a village. True, at its narrowest, the word refers to the center of an ancient village, to Miadana's house and the two houses next to it. At its broadest, however, it encompassed a large number of settlements spread out across two *fokontany*, whose residents

shared a common historical identity. When I was there in 1990, this broader Betafo consisted of roughly fifteen settlements, with eighty houses, and perhaps somewhere between 300 and 500 people. It's hard to come up with figures more precise. Settlements vary enormously in size: any place of human habitation is called a *tanana,* "town," even if it is only a single isolated house. It's hard to count people because everyone moves around so that it's hard to draw a line and say who is a resident and who is not—Armand's family being only a typical case in point. Particularly in winter, the agricultural off-season, large proportions of the population disperse to the city, to town, or other distant parts pursuing trade.

Most rural communities in Imerina have some economic specialization, which occupies people especially in winter. In one village, the men will all be butchers, in another the women all weave baskets, or make rope; spaces in the marketplace in Arivonimamo are mapped out as much by the origin of the vendors as by the goods they have for sale. The people of Betafo have been traditionally known as blacksmiths. Nowadays, roughly a third of its households still have smithy out back. Of those who do not, a very large number are involved in supplying smiths with iron ingots, and selling the plows and shovels they produce in markets and fairs in other parts of Imerina. What had started as a local effort had, by the time I was there, expanded dramatically, since in most of the region to the west of the capital, Betafo was mainly known for selling plows, despite the fact that no one in Betafo itself actually produced plows—the plows were all manufactured in other villages in the vicinity of Arivonimamo, with iron supplied by speculators from Betafo.

The intensification of commerce is one response to the economic crunch that has caused a dramatic fall in standards of living throughout Madagascar since the 1970s. It lead to a great increase in side occupations, so that in any one household, one woman might be spending much of her time running a coffee stand in town, or weaving, another making fermented manioc to sell to vendors in the market, one man driving an ox-cart part time and spending several months a year selling pineapples in a different part of Imerina, yet another might only drop by in the country occasionally, spending most of his days refilling disposable lighters near the taxi-stand in town. All this makes membership in a community like Betafo a bit hard to define. Not that I was trying to gather much in the way of statistics.

As I have said, my first work was on oral history: I started visiting villages like Betafo, usually accompanied by one or two Malagasy friends from

Arivonimamo. I never had a formal research assistant, but there were always people actively helping me with my work. I've already mentioned the names of two: Parson, the biology teacher, who helped me especially when I first arrived (and school was out of session); then, Chantal, a woman in theory performing her year of National Service at the time. Since in practice, this meant having to put on a green and brown uniform twice a week and give a geography class at the CEG, she had little else to do. These were also the people whose families I was living with; for all the time I ended up spending in Betafo, I never permanently relocated there.

The fact that I lived in Arivonimamo, only occasionally spending the night in Betafo, obviously has had an effect on my vision of the place. Among other things, it means that I have a much more intimate familiarity with the minutiae of everyday life in town. But living in Betafo would have lead to all sorts of problems. It would have made it almost impossible to avoid being identified with one faction. What I ended up doing was spending more time with Miadana's family than any other, but making a point, whenever I did sleep over, of always doing so at Armand's house, never theirs. I felt this struck a nice balance; a balance it would have been impossible to strike had I been forced to chose a single place to stay.

Research on spirit mediumship and curing was also much easier to do in town. It's not that there were no mediums in Betafo—there were, and they played an important part in its political life—it's just that the ones in Arivonimamo seemed much more interested in working with me.[7] So if here too I will be forced to fill out my description and analysis of Betafo, in part, with information drawn from other sources, it is largely because I always preferred to deal with the people who seemed the most enthusiastic about having me around.

A word on this latter point:

Like most anthropologists, I spent a lot of time thinking about the political aspects of conducting research. It is hard not to be a little self-conscious in a milieu where urbanites seemed to find a special joy in telling me how terrified country folk were of *Vazaha* (people of European stock, such as myself) and country folk, how terrified children were. For most Malagasy, the very word *Vazaha* evoked the threat of violence. Fortunately for me, it also had as its primary meaning "Frenchman," and (as I endlessly had to explain) I did not speak French. Speaking only in Malagasy took a lot of the edge off things. But conducting research itself had associations. On the one hand,

Imerina is a highly literate society: no one had any problem understanding what I meant if I said I was an American student carrying out research for his doctorate in anthropology. Nor did anyone seem to doubt that this was a legitimate, even an admirable thing to be doing. But techniques of knowledge were very closely identified with techniques of rule, and I quickly got the impression that there were certain sorts of inquiry people were much more comfortable with than others. Perhaps I was overly sensitive, but as soon as I got the feeling I was moving onto territory someone didn't want me delving into, I desisted. I would rather people talked to me about the things they wanted to talk about.

As a result, I probably know more about the distribution of property in Betafo in 1925—or even 1880—than I do for the time I was there. Property surveys were the sort of the thing the government would carry out, backed by the threat of force; this meant that there were extensive records in the archives; it also meant I myself didn't want to do one. Even the act of systematically going from door to door surveying household size would have been . . . well, rude. Lack of hard numbers seemed a minor price to pay.

The quality and texture of this study follow directly from my style of research. It mostly consists of people talking; often, of many talking at once. I rarely conducted formal interviews; instead, I would take out my tape recorder and turn it on whenever I had the slightest excuse; usually I would ask some questions or raise issues, but, once everyone was aware of the sort of topics that interested me things would often follow of their own accord—particularly if Miadana, or someone like her, was in the room.[8] It helped that verbal performance is so much appreciated in Madagascar; rather than people freezing up or becoming stifled, the presence of a tape recorder would often set people into playful competition in conversational skills, wit, or knowledge. Of course, in a place like Betafo, who said what in front of whom was a question full of politics. The political aspects of conversation are one of the major theoretical issues of the book.

As Miadana's case makes clear, avoiding topics people didn't want to talk about did not mean I only got the "official version" of events. To be honest, I often found authoritative accounts rather boring; they interested me in so far as they were full of holes. I always assumed when you see hesitation, confusion, tension, ambiguity, when people seemed to want to talk about something and not to want to talk about it at the same time, that this is was the surest sign there was something important going on. It was usually easier to explore

such territory with women. Women may have regularly deferred to men as the authoritative voices for representing the community, but as often as not, they would push the men on stage only to subvert their message as soon as they were done with it. Even the old woman who took me to her son to narrate village history ended up interrupting him, as soon as he was drawing to a close, to tell the story of a notorious local witch—completely shattering the image of solidarity he had just done his best to convey, and causing much consternation among the assembled menfolk. Things like this happened again and again. At times it seemed to take on an almost ritualized cast. In the end, I came to conclusion that it was this very process—men building up the placid surfaces that women would then mischievously puncture and expose—that history and moral discourse really consisted of. The object only existed when it had been halfway ripped apart.

The Very Existence of the State

Shortly before I left for Madagascar, an American who had done a lot of work there warned me to be very careful poking around the countryside. State authority, he said, was dissolving. In many parts of the island, it had effectively ceased to exist. Even in Imerina there were reports of *fokon'olona*—village assemblies—beginning to carry out executions.

This was one of those concerns forgotten almost as soon as I actually arrived in Madagascar. In the capital there was quite obviously a functioning government; almost every educated person seemed to work for it. When I moved to Arivonimamo, things did not seem particularly different. Certainly, people talked about the government all the time; everybody acted as if there was one. There was an administrative structure, offices where people typed up documents, registered things, kept track of births and deaths and the number of people's cattle. One even had to get permission to carry out the most important rituals. The government ran schools, held national exams; there were gendarmes, a prison, an airfield with military jets.

It was only in retrospect, once I left, that I began to wonder whether what he told me might actually have been true. Perhaps it was simply my own bias, the fact that I had always lived under an efficient and omnipresent government, that made me read the cues the wrong way. Perhaps there really wasn't a state in Betafo at all; perhaps not even in Arivonimamo—or anyway, not one in any way like what I or other Westerners have come to assume a state is like.

The key issue in most Western definitions of the state is its power to coerce. States use violence to enforce the law. The classic definition here is Weber's: an organization "will be called a 'state' insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order" (1968 I:54).[9] A definition like this is mainly a way to focus the mind; it is not much use for determining whether or not any particular organization is a state, since for that, everything depends on how one defines "successfully." But as often, Weber manages to capture the implicit common sense behind modern Western institutions—one in no way foreign to the Malagasy state, which was organized very much on a Western model. And most Malagasy, I think, would have agreed that the ability to apply force in this way was, essentially, what made a state what it was—even though, in most of the Malagasy countryside, the state had in reality become almost completely unwilling to do so.

In the capital, there were police. Around Arivonimamo the closest thing to a police force was a unit of gendarmes who had a barracks somewhat to the west of town. Mainly, they patrolled the highway. Occasionally, I was told, they would fight bandits further west; but they did not like to travel into the countryside. Outside of town, or not along the highway, gendarmes would never show up unless someone had been murdered.

Even in town, they did not act much like police. In Arivonimamo I heard a lot about a bully named Henri, a powerfully built man, perhaps insane (some said he was just pretending), who terrorized its inhabitants for years, posing a constant threat of rape or beatings. Henri used to help himself to merchandise at the local shops; he never paid for anything. After much discussion the young men of the town finally decided to join together and kill him. As it turned out, they didn't quite succeed: badly wounded, Henri managed to take refuge in the Catholic church and demanded sanctuary, claiming to be persecuted because he was mentally ill. The Italian priest hid him in the back of a van and smuggled him out to an insane asylum. He was soon discharged (he beat the other patients) but didn't dare show his face again in Arivonimamo for many years to come. But why hadn't the gendarmes done anything about him, I'd ask. Haven't you seen Henri, people would reply. He's enormous! But the gendarmes had guns, I said. Yes, but even so.

Occasionally, there might be a clash between principles of order. The immediate cause of the 1987 ordeal at Betafo, for instance, was the theft of a whole storage pit full of rice belonging to a notable elder. The suspected thief

was eventually killed, beaten to death by men from another village. Some said he was beaten to death by "the *fokon'olona,*" implying that this was a legitimate action: there seems to have been a tacit rule that the *fokon'olona* can take matters into its own hands when even a man's parents are no longer willing to defend him.[10] In this case the victim's father had refused to defend him before the *fokon'olona* in Betafo, even though he must have been aware of what that might open the way to. The men who attacked him thus probably felt they were within their rights. This, however, did not stop the gendarmes from appearing to arrest two of them—though that, in turn, seems to have been because some witnesses disagreed and went to the gendarmes demanding justice. Nonetheless, the point remains that it took something that extreme—an eyewitness to murder appearing on their doorstep—to inspire the gendarmes to venture onto the mud roads that lead out into the countryside.

All these were very exceptional events. The most significant thing about violence in Arivonimamo is that there was very little of it. Murders were shocking, isolated events; there were very few Henris. Nonetheless, rural assemblies had to develop all sorts of creative strategies to overcome the reluctance of the forces of order to enforce the laws. The practice of holding communal ordeals itself was one.[11] Another was the peculiar custom of advance confessions: in cases of assault, especially, the *fokon'olona* would often resolve matters by forcing the culprit to sign a statement confessing responsibility for any harm the victim might come to in the future. The papers would then be deposited with the gendarmes in town. In this case the state was being used as a kind of ghost-image of authority, a principle but not a threat, since if the culprit ignored the warning, unless he actually murdered his victim, the *fokon'olona* themselves would have to be the ones to arrest him and carry him down to the gendarmes' office; the papers would merely make it much more likely that he would then have to spend some time in jail.

Theories of social class almost always assume that a key role of the state—perhaps its most important role—is to underpin property relations. Contractual, market relations can only exist because their basic ground, the basic rules of the game, are enshrined in law. Those laws in turn are effective only in so far as everyone knows they will be backed up—in the last instance—by clubs and guns and prisons. And of course if the ultimate guarantor of property relations is state violence, then the same is true of social classes as well.

But in a place like Betafo the state simply did not play this role. I cannot imagine a situation under which it would dispatch armed men to uphold one

person's right to exclude another from their land—let alone to enforce a contract or investigate a robbery. This too was something whose full significance dawned on me only afterward, because everyone acted as if the government did play a crucial role in such things. The government kept track of who owned each piece of land: whenever someone died, the division of their fields and other property was meticulously recorded at the appropriate offices. Registering property, along with births and deaths, was one of the main things such offices did. There were all sorts of laws concerning land, and no one openly contested them, just as when talking in the abstract, they always talked as if they felt land registration did give an accurate picture of who had ultimate rights to what. In practice, however, legal principles were usually only one, relatively minor, consideration. If there was a dispute, legalities had to be weighed against a welter of "traditional" principles (which usually provided more than one possible solution to any given problem), the intentions of former owners, and not least, by people's broader sense of justice—the feeling, for instance, that no accepted member of the community should be completely deprived of the means of making a living. Certainly no one would think of taking the matter to court—except in a few rare cases where one of the disputants was an outsider. Even then, the court served mainly as a neutral mediator; everyone knew no one would enforce a court decision.[12]

There are various ways one might chose to consider the meaning of all this. One would be to assume that Merina culture has a different conception of the state than the Western one. Maybe the protection of property is simply not one of the functions anyone expects a government to fulfill. (To the extent people seem to say otherwise, they might just be paying lip service to alien principles imposed by the French colonial regime.) But in fact, the precolonial Merina state was veritably obsessed with protecting property. King Andrianampoinimerina, its founder, emphasized this role constantly in his speeches. Law codes, beginning with his own, always made the regulation of inheritance, rules about buying and renting, and the like, one of their most important areas of concern. Even the registration of lands predates the colonial period; records began to be kept in 1878, seventeen years before the French invasion.

On the other hand, existing evidence gives us no reason to believe that people then paid much more attention to this elaborate legal structure than they do today—although neither is any record of anyone openly challenging it. Legal systems have always been accepted in principle, and appealed to only

very selectively in practice. Mostly, people go about their business much as they had done before. It is this phenomenon, I think, which gives the best hint as to what's really going on.

Let me make a broad generalization. Confronted with someone bent on imposing unwanted authority, a typical Malagasy response will be to agree heartily with whatever demands that person makes, and then, as soon as they are gone, to try to go on living one's life as if the incident had never happened. One might even say this was the archetypically Malagasy way of dealing with authority. Admittedly, it is hardly a strategy limited to Madagascar. Something along these lines is often considered a typically "peasant" strategy: it is an obvious course to take when one is in no way economically dependent on those trying to tell one what to do. But there are many other routes to take, all sorts of possible combinations of confrontation, negotiation, subversion, acquiescence. In Madagascar, where there has always been a strong emphasis on avoiding open confrontation, the preferred approach has always been to do whatever it takes to make them happy until they go away, then ignore them. It even takes on a cosmological dimension. Malagasy myths on the origins of death claim that life itself was won from God in a deal that humans never really intended to keep. (Hence, it is said, God kills us.)

The mythological point is, I think, suggestive. One might well argue that this whole attitude is ultimately one with the logic of sacrifice, which at least in Madagascar is often explicitly phrased as a way of fobbing off the Divine Powers with a portion of what is rightfully theirs, so as to win the rest for living people. The life of the animal, it is often said, goes to God; hence (implicitly) we get to keep our own. Consider then the curious fact that all over Madagascar, sacrificial rituals—or their functional equivalents, such as the *famadihana* rituals of Imerina—always seem to require government permits. The fact that this permit has been received, that the paperwork has been properly done, is often made much of during the ceremony itself. Here is a fragment of a speech from the Betsimisaraka of eastern Madagascar, spoken over the body of a sacrificial ox:

> For this ox is not the kind of ox that lazes in its pen or shits anywhere on entering the village. Its body is here with us, but its life is with you, the government. You, the government, are like a great beast lying on its back: he who turns it over sees its huge jaws; so we, comrades, cannot turn that beast over! It is this official permit that is the knife that dares to cut its hide, the ax that dares to break its bones, which comes from you who hold political authority. (Aly 1984:59–60)

Not only is the state figured simultaneously as a potential force of violence and its victim; the act of acquiring a permit becomes equated with the act of sacrifice itself. The main point I am trying to make here is about autonomy. Filling out forms, registering land, even paying taxes, might be considered the equivalents of sacrifice: little ritualized actions of propitiation by which one wins the autonomy to continue with one's life.

This theme of autonomy crops up in any number of other studies of colonial and postcolonial Madagascar—notably, those of Gerald Althabe (1969, 1978), about these same Betsimisaraka, and Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1982, 1984, 1992) on the Sakalava of the northwest coast. But in these authors it takes on a sort of added twist, since both suggest that, in Madagascar, the most common way to achieve autonomy is by creating a false image of domination. The logic seems to be this: community of equals can only be created by common subordination to some overarching force. Typically, it is conceived as arbitrary and potentially violent in much the same way as the traditional Malagasy God. But it can also be equally far from everyday human concerns. One of the most dramatic responses to colonial rule, among both peoples, was the massive diffusion of spirit possession; in every community, women began to be possessed by the souls of ancient kings, whose will was considered (at least in theory) to have all the authority it would have had they been alive. By relegating ultimate social authority to entranced women speaking with the voices of dead kings, the power to constitute communities is displaced to a zone where French officials and police would have no way to openly confront it. In either case, there was the same kind of move: one manages to create a space for free action, in which to live one's life out of the grip of power, only by creating the image of absolute domination—but one which is ultimately only that, an image, a phantasm, completely manipulable by those it ostensibly subjects.

To put the matter crudely: one might say that the people I knew were engaged in a kind of scam. Their image of government had, at least since the colonial period, been one of something essentially alien, predatory, coercive. The principle emotion it inspired was fear. Under the French, the government apparatus was primarily an engine for extracting money and forced labor from its subjects; it provided relatively little in way of social benefits for the rural population (certainly, from the point of view of the rural population it didn't.) In so far as it did concern itself with its subjects' daily needs, it was with the conscious intention of creating new ones, of transforming their desires so as

to create a more deeply rooted dependence. Nor did matters change much after independence in 1960, since the first Malagasy regime made very few changes in its policy or mode of operation. For the vast majority of the population, the commonsense attitude was that the state was something to be propitiated, then avoided, in so far as it was in any way possible to do so.

It was only after the revolution of 1972 that things really began to change. An anti-colonial revolt in its origins, the '72 events introduced a succession of state-capitalist, military-based regimes—from 1975 until 1991, dominated by the figure of President Didier Ratsiraka. Ratsiraka found his political inspiration in Kim Il Sung of North Korea; in theory, his regime was dedicated to a very centralized version of socialist development and mobilization. From the beginning, though, he was uninterested in what he considered a stagnant, traditional peasant sector with little revolutionary potential. In agriculture as in industry, his government concentrated its efforts on a series of colossal development schemes, often heroic in scale, involving massive investment, funded by foreign loans. Loans were easy enough to get in the 1970s. By 1981 the government was insolvent. Ever since, Malagasy economic history has mainly been the story of negotiations with the IMF.

There is no room here to enter into details on the effects of IMF-ordered austerity plans. Suffice it to say their immediate result was a catastrophic fall in living standards, across the board. Hardest hit were the civil service and other government employees (who made up the bulk of the middle class) but—aside from a narrow elite surrounding the president himself, who stole liberally—pauperization has been well nigh universal. Madagascar is now one of the poorest countries on earth.

For Ratsiraka's "peasant sector"—rural areas not producing key commodities—this whole period was marked by the gradual withdrawal of the state. The most onerous taxes from the French period—the head tax, cattle tax, house tax—intended to force farmers to sell their products and thus to goad them into the cash economy, were abolished immediately after the revolution. Ratsiraka's regime first ignored rural administration; after 1981, it increasingly became the object of triage. The state, its resources ever more limited as budgets were endlessly slashed, was reduced to administering and providing minimal social services to those towns and territories its rulers found economically important: mainly, those which generated some kind of foreign exchange. Places like Arivonimamo, where almost all production and distribution was carried out outside the formal sector anyway, were of no interest to

them. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anything that could happen there—short of the area becoming the base for armed guerrillas (hardly a possibility)—that would seriously threaten the interests of the men who really ran the country.[13]

Resources for rural areas dried up. By the time I was in Arivonimamo, the only sector of administration that was receiving any significant funding was the education system. Even here the sums were paltry: the main government role was to post the teachers (who were sometimes paid at least in part by parents associations), provide curriculum and administer the tests. The latter, particularly the baccalaureate examinations, were of particular concern to the center because they were the gateway into the formal, state sector: those who passed it had to undergo several weeks of military training and then carry out a year's "National Service," though—as I've pointed out—this mainly consisted of lounging around in meaningless make-work jobs. But National Service was, I think, important. It was a way of marking passage into a domain where effective authority really did exist, where orders had to be obeyed. For those not ensconced in the educational system, the government provided nothing,[14] but it also had next to no immediate power over their lives.

Still, even in the countryside, government offices continued to exist. The typewriters were often crumbling, functionaries were often reduced to buying their own paper, since they could no longer requisition any, but people dutifully continued to fill out forms, requesting permission before uprooting trees or exhuming the dead, reporting births and deaths, and registering the number of their cattle. They must have realized that, had they refused, nothing would have happened. So, why did they play along?

One might, I suppose, call it inertia, sheer force of habit: people were still running the same scam, propitiating the state without having noticed its huge jaws were toothless. Certainly, memories of colonial violence were still vivid. Many times I was told of the early days of mass executions, or of how terrified rural people used to be when they had to enter a government office, of the endless pressure of taxation. But I think the real answer is more subtle.

Memories of violence were mainly important because they defined what people imagined a state to be about. I found little notion that the state (for all its socialist pretensions) existed to provide services; at least, no one much complained about the lack of them. People seemed to accept that a government was essentially an arbitrary, predatory, coercive power. But the one theme of official ideology everyone did seem to take seriously was the idea of Malagasy unity. In the highlands, at least, people saw themselves as "Malagasy;" they

hardly ever referred to themselves as "Merina." Malagasy unity was a constant theme in rhetoric; it was the real meaning, I think, of the Malagasy flags that inevitably accompanied any major ritual (whose official meaning was to mark that the forms had been filled out, the event approved). It seems to me that it was the very emptiness of the state which made it acceptable as a unifying force. When it was powerful, the state in Imerina was essentially seen as something French—this remained true even in the early years of independence. The 1972 revolution was first and foremost an effort to achieve genuine independence, to make the state truly Malagasy. For the highland population, I would say, this effort was largely successful—if only because at the same time, the state was stripped of almost all effective power. In other words, the government became something along the same lines as the ancient kings discussed by Althabe and Feeley-Harnik: absolute, arbitrary powers that constitute those they subjugate as a community by virtue of their common subjugation, while at the same time, extremely convenient powers to be ruled by, because, in any immediate practical sense, they do not exist.

Provisional Autonomous Zone

In contemporary anarchist circles it has become common to talk of "TAZ"s, "temporary autonomous zones" (Hakim Bey 1991). The idea is that, while there may no longer be any place on earth entirely uncolonized by State and Capital, power is not completely monolithic: there are always temporary cracks and fissures, ephemeral spaces in which self-organized communities can and do continually emerge like eruptions, covert uprisings. Free spaces flicker into existence and then pass away. If nothing else, they provide constant testimony to the fact that alternatives are still conceivable, that human possibilities are never fixed.

In rural Imerina, it might be better to talk about a "provisional autonomous zone," rather than a "temporary" one: in part, to emphasize that it does not stand quite so defiantly outside power as the image of a TAZ implies; but also, because there is no reason to necessarily assume its independence is all that temporary. Betafo, even to a large extent Arivonimamo, stood outside the direct control of the state apparatus: even if the people who live there passed back and forth between them and zones, such as the capital, which are very much under the domination of the state. Their autonomy was tentative, uncertain, it might be largely swept away the moment a new infusion of guns and

money restores the apparatus; but then again, it might not. Some might consider the current situation scandalous. Myself, I consider it a remarkable accomplishment. After all, austerity plans have been imposed on nations all over the world; few governments have reacted by abandoning the bulk of the population to govern themselves; nor would many populations have been so well prepared to do so.

I don't mean to romanticize the situation. What autonomy rural communities have has been won at the cost of grinding poverty; it is hard to enjoy one's freedom if one is in a constant scramble to have enough to eat. Institutions of rule—most obviously schools and Christian churches—still functioned, and in the same hierarchical way as ever, even if they did now largely lacked the power to back up their efforts with the threat of physical force. Nor was a place like Betafo one within which people dealt with each other in a particularly egalitarian fashion—far from. If it had been, people there wouldn't have been getting along so badly.

In order to understand what happened in Betafo, then, one must first understand that it was a place that stood effectively outside state power; then, that it did not stand entirely outside it. For all the efforts to maintain zones of autonomy, the reality of coercion has by now reshaped the terms by which people deal with each other; in certain ways, it has become embedded in the very structure of experience.

In Imerina, just about everyone considers themselves a Christian (about two-thirds of the population is Protestant, one-third Catholic). Many regularly attend church. The government may no longer have the means to compel children to attend school, but attendance is still close to universal, at least at the primary level. At the same time, however, there is a certain ambivalence about both these institutions, particularly the schools. As I already remarked when speaking of the politics of research, the educational system in Imerina has always been seen as a tool of power, and always, too, identified with *Vazaha*. The present educational system took form under the French colonial regime. It is important to bear in mind that this was not a regime that could ever make the remotest claim to being the expression of popular will. It was a regime imposed by conquest, maintained only by the constant threat of force.

It is worth considering for a moment what maintaining a credible threat of force actually requires. It is not merely a matter of having an adequate number of men willing to use violence, not even a matter of arming and training them. Mostly, it is a matter of coordination. The crucial thing is to be

able to ensure that a sufficient number of such violent men will always be able to show up, whenever and wherever there is an open challenge to one's authority—and that everyone knows that they will indeed do so. But this, in turn, requires a great deal. It requires an extensive cadre of trained functionaries capable of processing information, not to mention an infrastructure of roads, telephones, typewriters, barracks, repair shops, petroleum depots—and the staff to maintain them. Once built, such an infrastructure can and doubtless will serve other purposes as well. Roads built to transport soldiers will also end up carrying chickens to market and people to visit their ailing relatives. But if it wasn't for the soldiers, the roads would never have been there, and at least in Madagascar, people seemed perfectly well aware of that.

Most of the people who work in a state bureaucracy—pretty much any state bureaucracy, anywhere—are, on a day to day level, much more concerned with processing information than with breaking people's skulls. But the same is true of soldiers and police. Rather than see this fact as proof that violence plays a minor role in the operation of a state, it might be better to ask oneself how much these technologies of information are themselves part of the apparatus of violence, essential elements in ensuring that small handful of people willing and able to break skulls will always be able to show up at the right place at the right time. Surveillance, after all, is a technique of war, and Foucault's Panopticon was a prison, with armed guards.

Viewed from Madagascar, the essentially violent nature of the state is much harder to deny. This is not only because of its colonial history. It is also because most Malagasy—at least the ones I knew—are accustomed to different standards of perception. The best way to put it is that, unlike most Americans, they did not see anything particularly shameful about fear. This was one of the things it took me longest to get used to, there: seeing grown men, for instance, gazing into the street and casually remarking "scary cars," "I'm scared of those oxen." For someone brought up as I had been it was very disconcerting. I may not come from a particularly macho background, by American standards, but I had been brought up to assume confessions of fear, at least fear of being physically harmed by others, were at least a little bit embarrassing. Most Malagasy seemed to find the subject pleasant and amusing; they took a veritable delight in telling me how afraid some people were of *Vazaha*, sometimes, even, how much they themselves were. That governments work largely through inspiring fear in their subjects was simply obvious to them. It seems to me that, in so far insofar as Western social science has a tendency to

downplay the importance of coercion, it is partly because of a hidden embarrassment: we find it shameful to admit to the degree to which our own daily lives are framed by the fear of physical force.[15]

Schools, anyway, are ultimately a part of this apparatus of violence: In Malagasy, one does not speak of education as conveying facts and information so much as skills: the word used, *fahaizana,* means "skills, know-how, practical knowledge." The kind of *fahaizana* one acquires at school however was seen as an essentially foreign one, a *fahaizana Vazaha,* opposed, as such, to Malagasy forms of know-how. The techniques taught in school were seen as, essentially, techniques of rule. In part this is because the school system was itself part of the infrastructure of violence: it was designed primarily to train functionaries; secondarily, technicians. The style of teaching was entirely authoritarian, with a heavy emphasis on rote memorization, and the skills that were taught were taught with the expectation they were to be employed in offices, workshops, or classrooms organized around certain forms of social relation, what might be referred to as relations of command. The assumption was always that some people would be giving orders, others were there to obey. In other words, not only was this system designed to produce the competences required to maintain an infrastructure of violence, it was premised on social relations completely unlike those current in other aspects of daily life, ones that could only be maintained by a constant threat of physical harm.

The ambivalence toward research and book learning, then, was based on a perfectly sensible appreciation of the situation. Everyone considered knowledge in itself a valuable, even a pleasant, thing; everyone recognized that the skills one learned in school opened spheres of experience that would not otherwise be available, to types of information and networks of communication that spanned the globe. But these skills were also techniques of repression. By training people in certain methods of organization and not others (how to keep lists and inventories, how to conduct a meeting . . .), the system ensured that no matter what their purposes, any large-scale network they put together capable of coordinating anything—whether it be an historical preservation society, or a revolutionary party—will almost inevitably end up operating somewhat like a coercive bureaucracy.[16] Certainly, one can, and many did, try to rework these devices to operate in a more consensual, democratic manner (Armand, for example, was involved with a party trying to do precisely that); it can be done, but it is extremely difficult; and the tendency, the drift, is for any system created by people trained in these competencies, no matter how

revolutionary their intentions, to end up looking at least a little like the French colonial regime. Hardly surprising then that most people wrote these techniques off as inherently foreign, and tried as much as they could to isolate them from "Malagasy" contexts.

This is one thing I mean when I say that coercion had become internalized in the structure of experience. There was a whole domain of experience, characterized by certain, ultimately coercive ways of dealing with other people, which everyone to some degree participated in; even if they tried to limit their effects. And in Betafo, there was the added problem that these forms of knowledge were definitely associated with certain people more than others.

One might say there were three important groups in Betafo: rich nobles, poor nobles, and slaves. This would not be strictly accurate. The "nobles" were never really nobles; the "slaves" are certainly no longer slaves. But the English words evoke much the same associations as the Malagasy words *andriana* and *andevo*. Most *andriana* did imagine their ancestors to have been wealthy and powerful relatives of kings; most black people did imagine their ancestors to have been bondsmen, fieldhands, people kidnapped from their homes to be bought and sold "like cattle," prone to be punished arbitrarily by their masters—most all the things normally called to mind by the English "slave."

During the nineteenth century, most *andriana* were simple farmers, but there were a handful of very wealthy families. These were the families who owned by far the largest share of slaves. After the French conquest and the abolition of slavery, in 1895, most of them managed to find positions in the French administration; within a generation, they had moved out of Betafo entirely, giving a portion of their land to former slaves, and arranging for the rest to be sharecropped by them. Their present-day descendants live in Antananarivo, or in Paris; they have moved on to an entirely different social class. Most of Betafo's *andriana* remain what they have always been—poor farmers—even if they see themselves as descendants of lords and slave-owners; many are convinced that as a group they are slowly declining into poverty, even as the black people advance, as punishment for this ancient guilt.

I said in the last section that rights in land were not really determined by the law, but rather by consensus, a weighing of custom against a broader sense of justice. Such a consensus though is always easier to arrive at where everyone is kin; or at the very least, where there is a certain feeling of commonality. Where the community is divided between two groups that see themselves as of entirely different origins, whose main past relations have been based on

exploitation and oppression, and a third that doesn't even live there, this can be much more difficult to do. The existence of a class of absentees meant that, at least in Betafo, the sudden disappearance of coercion did make a difference in the status of land-holding. It meant the slow process by which former sharecroppers had been taking over land around Betafo sped up dramatically. In fact, the former absentee class would have probably had next to nothing left, by the time I showed up, had it not been for the arrival of Miadana and her family.

Miadana was a nice person in an impossible situation. She was a woman who enjoyed science-fiction novels and classical music; the wife of a civil servant named Claude Ravorombato who had followed him to postings all over Madagascar; a woman who had lived all her life within the apparatus of state. Then, in the '80s, salaries collapsed, a series of stomach operations forced her husband into early retirement. They had six children, but none yet old enough to take government positions of their own. With no source of income, they were forced, for the time being, to move back to Claude's mother's natal village, and support themselves as best they could by farming the land that had until then been worked by descendants of their former slaves.

Having lived all their lives in an environment defined by state power, they found themselves growing rice in village in which state power did not exist, among people who saw her family as the living representatives of an historical tradition of repression. I think they made a sincere effort to do whatever it took to get along; they studiously avoided doing anything that could be interpreted as placing themselves above their neighbors; still, many of those neighbors refused from the start to have anything to do with them. After the ordeal, it got worse. "There are people saying that we're mean," Miadana complained—the term she used, *masiaka,* "fierce, savage, cruel," being one that is usually applied to ancestors, and particularly to her own ancestor in the great white tomb next to her own house, the one that people were really avoiding when they started staying away from that part of the village. Miadana's complaint expresses perfectly the fusion of ancestor and descendant that was the real basis of people's chariness in having her around. They did not really distinguish between the power of slave-holding ancestors and modern bureaucrats. They were considered to be essentially the same thing.

The historical traditions I collected didn't have much to say about the colonial period. Neither did they address the sort of issues I've been talking about in these last two sections—at least, not directly. But stories about the

precolonial past, and particularly, those about masters and slaves, can be read as veritable meditations on the nature of coercive power. This is an issue I will be treating in more detail in the next chapter; for now, suffice it to say that this was an even more fundamental way in which coercion had become embedded in the structure of daily experience: the very existence of a division between "black" and "white" people is seen as testimony to a history of violence. In Betafo, both groups suddenly found themselves confronting each other within in a de facto Autonomous Zone, a place where the props of state violence had suddenly been kicked away. The result was a political struggle; in the end, a major political confrontation.

But as the story of the ordeal makes clear, this struggle was not carried out by anything we would consider conventional political means. True, there were periodic elections. Most black people were adherents of the ruling party (AREMA), most white ones, to the theoretically pro-Soviet AKFM. But no one took party politics very seriously. Formal political institutions, in a place like Betafo, had become almost meaningless. The accustomed strategy of dealing with power was to fend it off and try to establish an autonomous, Malagasy domain outside its sight—one sheltered from the "political" domain and the threat of violence on which it was based. The result was that, when state-sponsored institutions began withering away, new ones did not arise to replace them.[17] With no overtly political sphere, or none to speak of, politics had to be conducted through other means. As a result, everything became political. Particularly, everything "Malagasy." Manipulating stories, interpreting dreams, making veiled hints about the possible extent of one's magical powers, preventing others from eating garlic, claiming credit for freak acts of weather—such things became the principle medium of politics.

Why You Might Want to Read This Book

> Men make their history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.
>
> —Karl Marx

The rest of this book is not, for the most part, about the relation between Betafo and the state (real or imagined), but about how politics is actually conducted in such unusual circumstances. This is a book about the relation between

politics and history: about what it means to act politically; to act historically; about the point at which one begins to slip into the other. As with any work of anthropology, this work sets out from the assumption that the best way to gain insight into such pan-human questions is to look at people who seem to go about the same things in the most unfamiliar ways. People in rural Imerina do, indeed, carry about an implicit theory of history, of the way the past continues to shape and influence the present, which is very different than that carried about by the typical inhabitant of Cleveland or Singapore. The tradition of the dead generations does indeed weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living: often, literally.

But this is more than simply a comparison of assumptions about the meaning of history. I also wanted to write a particular, somewhat experimental, sort of ethnography. Perhaps the best way to put it would be: one which would treat ordinary people—people like Armand, Miadana, Ratsizafy—as historical characters. By this I mean, treating them not as exemplars of something other than themselves—or at least, not primarily so—but rather as actors, human beings actively shaping the world in which they exist, even if they are (like any of us) not entirely aware of the degree to which they are doing so. People who have the capacity of acting in ways that no prior model would have been able to predict. Social science, after all, is very good at describing things that have already occurred in such a way as to imply they could have been predicted beforehand; it is rarely able to actually predict anything. I wanted to write in such a way as to keep an awareness of this alive in the account itself: to retain a sense that one can never be completely sure what these people are about to do. It's not that I am trying to deny the degree to which their lives are shaped and constrained by larger forces; I just don't want that to be the only point. In a way, what I'm trying to do is perhaps not that different from what I've said so many Malagasy themselves were doing: carving out a small, somewhat tenuous space of autonomy and freedom within social theory itself.

This is also why the theorizing focuses so consistently on action: not asking "What is politics?", but "What is political action?"; not history, but historical action; an approach which is no doubt made easier by the fact that the Malagasy cosmology itself assumes that the world ultimately arises, in one way or another, from the play of human intentions.

The emphasis on characters, in turn, leads to an emphasis on character, a moral dimension which runs throughout the book. A lot of the next three chapters are about understanding how people in Betafo sit in judgment on

each other. This is a social world that is not only rife with human purposes, but with people actively discussing the rights and wrongs of them. Inevitably, then—as with Michael Lambek's work on "moral practice" (1992), which this very much recalls—this leads to an emphasis on the political status of narrative, gossip, secrets. It also means the people I talk about the most are not typical members of the community—most are characters, oddballs, eccentrics of one sort or another—but this is probably inevitable too: much of the moral life of a community, probably anywhere, is spent in endless conversations about such people, and they usually end up playing a role in its most dramatic political events. After mapping this out, I will follow with a brief history of Betafo (chapter 5), and a detailed account of how the game of politics is actually played there (chapter 6). Betafo, I argue, is just the kind of anomalous case that allows one to question the very meaning of politics, and much of the chapter is concerned with developing a theory of the relation of political action and representation that could work in such a context. At this point, it's possible to look again at the relation between its *andriana* and its *mainty* (chapters 7 to 11), of the hidden grudges and unlikely ambitions that eventually lead to the catastrophe of 1987.

I certainly don't mean to suggest this is the only proper way to write an ethnography, or even that anyone else should necessarily try to write this way. Perhaps what follows is the inevitable result of a researcher interested in history showing up in the middle of such a semi-insurrectionary community, in a highly individualistic culture, in a community full of what often seem the best gossip in the world. But I think it's the only way to write about Betafo which begins to do justice to the people living there.

ROYAL AUTHORITY

2

The island of Madagascar, over a thousand miles long, is located in the Indian Ocean opposite the coast of Mozambique. According to the best evidence now available, it was not inhabited until around 600 or even 800 CE; its first inhabitants came from somewhere in what is now Indonesia. While people have been arriving from Africa ever since, and the population is now thoroughly mixed, the language spoken throughout the island, Malagasy, is an Austronesian language—its closest relative, Maanjan, is spoken in Borneo.[1]

Imerina[2] compromises the north of a high plateau that runs down the center of the island. For most of Malagasy history it was something of a backwater. When Nicholas Mayeur—the first European to write a description of Imerina—passed through in 1777, he found it broken into a dozen warring principalities. While technologically advanced (its smiths, he said, were capable of producing their own muskets, and even of counterfeiting European currency) it was politically disorganized. Raiders from the coast regularly carried off its villagers to be sold to European or Arab slavers, and shipped off to European-owned sugar plantations on Mauritius or Reunion.

All this began to change after King Andrianampoinimerina (1789–1810) managed to clamp Imerina's fragmented polities together into a strong, centralized state. Seven years after his death, British envoys arrived at the court of his son, Radama I (1810–1828), and offered to recognize him as king of Madagascar if he agreed to outlaw the export of slaves. They also agreed to provide money, missionary teachers to create a school system and literate civil service, arms, and military training. Within a decade, Radama's red-coated, British-trained musketeers were established in bases the length and breadth of the island, and Imerina had gone from a victimized backwater to an imperial power controlling almost the whole of Madagascar. With Radama's wars

of conquest, captives started to flow into the Merina country rather than out of it. Before long a fair proportion of the population was composed of people kidnapped from the coasts. These were the ancestors of the "black people" who remain in Imerina today; even after their liberation in 1895, the former slaves were never absorbed into the wider population.

After Radama died power passed to a clique of military officers, who ruled in the name of a series of queens; the first, Ranavalona I (1828–1861), Radama's widow. Ranavalona I is mainly famous for breaking the alliance with England and for expelling the missionaries, and promoting a pantheon of "royal idols," or *sampy,* as a kind of religion of state to rival Christianity. After some uncertain efforts to find a middle ground, Ranavalona II (1868–1884) converted to Protestant Christianity: she marked the act by having the "idols" burned. The Merina government hoped to reestablish an alliance with England as well; but in the end, England proved an indifferent protector. The British government turned its back when a French expeditionary force marched on Antananarivo in 1895, and Madagascar became a French colony.

It was a continual irony of French rule that, while the colonizers always claimed to be protecting coastal people from Merina domination, they were also always forced to rely on Merina civil servants to run the country. Imerina had an enormous advantage in education—there had been a functioning school system in place for decades before the French invasion. Most of the children of the old elite—the "Merina bourgeoisie," as they came to be known—managed to quickly reposition themselves as functionaries, doctors, pastors, teachers, merchants, pharmacists, and engineers. What I am mainly interested in, however, is not the perspectives of such people, but of what are in Imerina called *olona tsotra,* "simple people," the vast majority who continue to spend most of their time in small towns like Arivonimamo, rural communities like Betafo, or the poorer districts of the capital—and who even members of the elite tend to refer to on matters they consider distinctly "Malagasy." What I would like to do over the next few chapters is to explain how authority is seen to work among such "simple people," about legitimate, and illegitimate, ways of acting in the world. I'll start by talking about royal authority. Since there have been no actual royalty in Imerina for a century, it is, perhaps, less important to understand what the Merina kingdom was really like than to understand what people think it was like now. Still, it might be useful to start with a brief glance at royal ritual, since it's perhaps the best way to understand basic

assumptions about the nature of society and cosmos that continue to provide the grounds for human action to this day.

"Royal Idols"

"When Europeans first went up to the interior province of Imerina in the early years of the present century, wrote the missionary James Sibree in 1880, "they found a number of idols held in veneration by the people." In addition to "the household idols or *sampy* common to every house, and those held in special veneration in different villages and districts," were some fifteen or sixteen particularly which were seen as protecting the sovereign and the kingdom as a whole (Sibree 1880:298).

Actually, these "idols" were, as Sibree himself went on to point out, simply elaborate versions of objects referred to as *ody,* usually translated "amulet" or "charm." There were an infinite variety of *ody: ody* meant to prevent the bearer from being attacked by crocodiles, to guarantee the success of a journey, to inspire sexual desire, or make one's opponent's tongue trip over his words in court. They tended, though, to have very specific purposes. *Sampy* provided a more general protection for whole social groups. Their keepers would, periodically, assemble the people under their protection and have them sprinkled with water in which the *sampy* had been washed to fortify against sorcery, disease, and other dangers. "Royal *sampy*" (*sampin'andriana:* Domenichini 1977, Berg 1979) were believed to have the power to bring together a kingdom, and protect it against hail, locusts, bandits, foreign armies, witchcraft, famine, rebellion, and disease. They always accompanied the king during public ceremonies and military campaigns, as the material embodiments of royal power. When missionaries arrived in Imerina in 1817, dubbed the *sampy* "idols," and dedicated themselves to their extirpation, the result was an ongoing political crisis.

Why they should have been labeled "idols" at all, on the other hand, is not all that easy to understand. True, in some ways they did resemble the idols of the Old Testament. They were material objects that were also thought of as intelligent beings; they were both oddly shaped pieces of wood, sometimes said to have human or animal form, and invisible spirits with their own names and personalities; they had their own keepers and houses and one occasionally even hears of their being "fed" and "clothed," much like Mesopotamian or

Biblical idols. But in at least one sense, the identification is downright bizarre. The Old Testament condemnation of idols, after all, is based on their being *images*—specific, visible objects as opposed to a universal, invisible God. But *sampy* were in no sense images. "It is difficult to answer the inquiry of what shape and appearance are the national idols of the Malagasy," writes one missionary (Ellis 1838 I:399), "because, so far from their being publically exhibited, it is considered impious to endeavour to get a sight of them." In fact, like *ody, sampy* were made up of pieces of rare wood, bark, or roots, along with beads and silver ornaments, which were always kept hidden inside in a horn, box, or small satchel. Even when *sampy* were brought out on the end of poles to be displayed before the people, they were wrapped in red silk cloth.

Such objects could be referred to generically as *fanafody,* "medicine," classed together with simple herbal infusions, and indeed even royal *sampy* were dipped in water and sprinkled on the king's subjects. Still, most Malagasy sources (e.g., Callet 1908:82–85) were careful to stress that their power did not derive from any intrinsic virtue of the ingredients, but from the will of an invisible spirit that operated through them.

It is a peculiar feature of the Malagasy cosmos that the spirits that inhabit it are largely invisible, formless, nameless, incorporeal. With few exceptions, they are generic beings, completely lacking in defining features. "Spirits" embodied the possibility of creativity, action, or growth, a power that in Malagasy is referred to as *hasina.* As sheer potential, they were undefinable; spirits were generic beings, invisible, which hid away in deep caves or could only be glimpsed from the corner of one's eye; they disappeared as soon as one stared directly at them. The ambiguity was itself a way of saying they are powerful, that they could not be defined by what they were, but simply their capacity to act, create, or have perceptible effects on the world (Graeber 1996b).

When spirits do acquire names, or more specific identities, it's by association with some object—a rock, a tree, an *ody*—through which they can act. Such objects are said to be *masina,* usually translated "sacred," but which mainly means to have *hasina,* which is precisely the invisible capacity to affect the world in visible ways (Delivre 1974:144–145). Hence, the power of an *ody* or *sampy* was identified with some generic spirit or disembodied intelligence that could be appealed to in prayers and otherwise treated like conscious beings; but without the charm itself, the spirit's power was simply an abstraction. The specific powers of a particular charm were based on its particular ingredients—or even more, of their names—which determined how this generic capacity or

hasina could actually make itself known.[3] By this ritual logic, one might say it was the fact that the ingredients of charms were hidden from sight that gave them their capacity for action.

Intentions, Desires, and a Kind of Social Contract

Two things are critical here, I think. First, *ody* were capacities. They almost never worked on the owner, but gave the owner the capacity to have effects on someone else. Rifle charms never make their owners impervious to bullets; they make those shooting at their owners miss. Love magic does not make the user beautiful; it invokes desire directly in another. Rather than acting on the holder, the hidden elements of charms were, ultimately, identified with their holders' own ability to act upon the world.

Second, all of this involved a kind of flickering awareness that it really was human beings who created the world that they lived in. Spirits were nothing in themselves. They were little more than raw potential. They only became specific powers—the capacity to do some specific thing, rather than sheer capacity in the abstract—through association with a specific object.[4] Even more important, the connection between object and spirit was not simply fortuitous. It was always the result of human action: someone made the object, or dedicated it, or made offerings or vows to it, or otherwise imbued it with *hasina.* If a piece of wood had the power to ward off hail, or a spring to cure infertility, it was because someone wanted it that way. Even the invisible powers lurking in rocks and trees are ultimately the result of human purposes.[5]

The way people talked about "medicine" often seemed only one or two tenuous steps away from social science. Not only that it was ultimately human intentions that shaped the social world, but also, that this was largely through the power of words. Words themselves could be said to have *hasina* in so far as they are persuasive (Delivre 1974:143), and it was, ultimately, the names of the various objects that made up *ody* (a bead called "capable of bringing together," a root called "to turn aside" . . .) that determined what they could do.

In the nineteenth century, it was once common when making an appeal to the invisible powers, to accompany one's words with an object—a bit of wood, a bead, a silver ornament—whose form represented, in visual form, the action one was asking those powers to take. Most often, one would place such an object in a bowl on the ritual shelf in the northeast corner of one's house. If one's prayers were in fact answered, the object would preserved permanently; it

would become an *ody,* the embodiment of a force capable of carrying out the action on a regular basis. As such it would no longer be displayed, but hidden in a horn or a box or a sack, wrapped in red silk, or otherwise put out of sight (Graeber 1996; cf. Ellis 1837, 1:435; Callet 1908:56; Chapus and Ratsimba 1953:91n134).

This was not the only way *ody* were created. Probably it was not even the most common. But the example underlines how much *ody* and *sampy* are basically externalized intentions, material embodiments of their creator's desires and purposes. More often, though, the process was collective, a matter of agreement. Edmunds (1897), another missionary, claims that most *ody* were consecrated by an "pledge of allegiance" on the part of those who wished to employ it: "Until the consecration service has been held, and the pledge of allegiance given, the charm, although finished as regards its construction and general characteristics, was only a piece of wood to them" (op cit: 62). In the end, it was the action, and the social agreement, again through words, which gave it power. All *ody* and *sampy*—even the most famous—had to be maintained by rituals (also referred to as *manasina*).[6] Otherwise their power to benefit humans would eventually fade away.

All this was developed most explicitly in royal ritual. In the nineteenth century, the verb *manasina* was most commonly used for the act of presenting gifts of money to the sovereign. This was partly because whole silver coins, the kind that were given in such ceremonies, were themselves called *hasina.*[7] *Hasina* had to be given every time the king made an official appearance, and during public assemblies there was an elaborate protocol in which representatives of each of the various ranks, orders, and geographical divisions of the kingdom offered it in turn. But in presenting these coins to the king, they gave him *hasina* in the other sense as well. When they are used as elements in charms (see Graeber 1996b), unbroken coins were seen to represent wholeness and perfection; here, they implied the integrity of the kingdom, the hope that its unity should remain intact. The act of giving a coin as a token of loyalty, then, can be seen as itself creating the king—or, at least, creating the power by which he unifies the kingdom: in a word, his *hasina.*[8]

Nineteenth-century texts always speak of royal power as a matter of "gathering people together" (*mahavory,* or *mamory*), making them all "agree" (*manaiky*) to royal rule. The kingdom was imagined as a grand assembly. But when such grand assemblies were actually held, assembled people expressed

their agreement by offering *hasina:* in effect, creating the power by which they had just been brought together. The people became a people in their act of recognizing a king, who embodied their will to be united as a people.

All this rather recalls European social contract theories. The analogy should probably not be pushed too far, but *hasina* did, in fact, have to be presented to the sovereign whenever two of his subjects made a contract with one another. Legal documents show this was one of the principal ways royal ritual actually entered people's daily lives. If a group of villagers agreed on the division of a piece of property, if a child was adopted, a field mortgaged, a slave sold, then *hasina* had to be given to the king. Otherwise the contractual agreement had no legal standing. It was as if royal power had to be created over and over again. As if people continually had to recreate the power which bound them together in a moral community—to recreate the force which guaranteed it.

This was also, I should briefly add, very much an alien force of violence, set apart from the society whose relations it guaranteed. "The king," went a familiar proverb, "has no relatives." And while official rhetoric and histories tend to avoid the subject, more informal accounts (e.g., Raombana n.d.) and European witnesses, make it clear that sovereigns communicated their power particularly through spectacular displays of violence: as when whole villages were put to the poison ordeal, and the guilty smashed to death with rice pestles, or in which dozens of courtiers suspected of witchcraft were publicly dismembered, and their still-living heads and torsos thrown off cliffs.

What all this implies for present conceptions of a moral community will have to wait for the next chapter. For now, let me turn to *Andriana* as a social class.

Being an *Andriana*

The sovereign could be referred to as *Andriana*, but the term was also applied to a broader social class. In principle, all *andriana* were descended from some Merina king, by a link of no more than seven generations. After seven generations, one slipped back into the status of *hova*, generally translated "commoner," which was the condition of the bulk of the population.

The Merina king Andrianampoinimerina (1789–1810) divided the *andriana* into a hierarchy of seven orders. One can find the following list in just about any book on Malagasy history:

1. Zanak'Andriana
2. Zazamarolahy
3. Andriamasinavalona
4. Andriantompokoindrindra
5. Andrianamboninolona
6. Andriandranando
7. Zanad-Ralambo

In fact, these are not even all groups of the same type. Members of the first three somewhat resembled what we would call a landed nobility. They almost all held estates, called *menakely:* territories within which they had the right to receive a share of taxes and labor services, decide judicial cases, and the like. The first two were made up of particularly close relatives of Andrianampoinimerina himself, and their descendants. The third was, in theory, made up of the descendants of an eighteenth-century king—though in fact it consisted mainly of the descendants of minor Merina rulers who had agreed to accept Andrianampoinimerina's authority, and were thus allowed to keep a certain measure of power within their old dominions. They lived scattered across Imerina, and generally had little to do with one another.

The other four groups were much less like noble orders, and more like territorial descent groups—what Maurice Bloch calls "demes." Their founders were said to have been royalty, or nearly so, but otherwise, there was little to distinguish them from commoner demes, aside from certain privileges and exemptions such as the right to wear red coral beads, not to pay most taxes, or never to be executed except by strangling with a silk cord. Their territories were almost all limited to the area immediately surrounding the capital. This is not because there were no similar groups claiming royal origins in other parts of Imerina. Imerina was full of groups claiming genealogical links to some dynasty or other. But only those favored by Andrianampoinimerina were recognized in the official hierarchy.

Before unification, a typical kingdom would be a complex patchwork of local demes—*andriana*, *hova*, and *mainty*.[9] Each deme had its own historical traditions, or *tantara,* mainly concerned with how it had come into alliance with the ruling dynasty; each, its own set of privileges and exemptions, and

privileged forms of royal service (Delivre 1974). The fact that one deme had the exclusive right to tile the roofs of royal tombs, or another, to circumcise royal infants, or provide certain plants or animals to be sacrificed at important rituals, was an integral part of its standing in the kingdom as a whole, and an essential part of that group's *tantara* as well.

Kings were the final arbiters in such matters. In fact, one gets the impression Merina sovereigns spent a fair amount of their time ruling on whether some group could indeed claim *andriana* status, or whether another really had the right to maintain some legal immunity they claimed to have been rewarded them by some former king. Each decision would be marked by an *orimbato,* or standing stone, that would be raised in a deme's territories as permanent memorial. Royal power, then, might have had to be continually recreated, but one of the main things it accomplished was to establish what was permanent.

All of this, of course, completely vanished with the abolition of the monarchy. The stones are still there, but (if the place I was in was at all typical) no one any longer remembers what they were once supposed to mean. Once royal rituals were no longer being carried out, there was no point in remembering who had what ritual privilege: I found no trace of them in oral traditions of the present day. On the other hand, the oral tradition is no longer the only one. Since the colonial period, royal authority has been replaced by the authority of historians and books.

Mission-educated Merina had already begun writing down historical traditions in the 1860s. In the '70s, a Jesuit missionary named Callet gathered together a large number of historical manuscripts and published them in a series of printed editions that appeared over the next several decades. The resulting collection, called the *History of the Sovereigns of Imerina* (Callet 1908) has remained (after the Bible) the most popular book in the Malagasy language ever since. It in turn has become the basis for innumerable historical studies, as well as the core of the Malagasy history curriculum every child in the country has to learn, from primary school on up.

Imerina is a very literate society. Historical knowledge is taken seriously. It is not at all uncommon to find dusty old books on Malagasy history, in French or Malagasy, tucked away in chests in rural houses. People would often bring them out for me. But one reason for this interest is that, at least for those who claim some connection with the grandees of the Merina kingdom (and this means, a very large percentage of the educated people of the capital), these

written histories continue to be the foundation of their status. And those claiming expertise in such matters are very often called on to fulfill precisely the functions kings used to: to render authoritative rulings on the claims to status of one or another group. It suffices to flip through the *Firaketana*—a Merina encyclopedia written in the mid-twentieth century by two Protestant ministers—to get a feel for this intellectual world. It is a work of incredible erudition, but many entries consist of little more than detailed demonstrations of why one or another group's claims to *andriana* status cannot possibly be justified.

I would occasionally hear the same sort of thing in Arivonimamo. I particularly remember a rather pretentious friend of Betafo's schoolteacher who was visiting from the city, and with whom I had a discussion of the history of Imamo. The region to the west of the capital is called Imamo, after the ancient kingdom that used to dominate it; it was only around the year 1800 that it was incorporated into the kingdom of Imerina. Imamo's original inhabitants, he told us (slipping into French as he did so), were "not Indonesians or Polynesians, but Arabs." When conversation turned to local *andriana*, he solemnly informed us that he had discussed this matter with a noted professor of Malagasy in the capital, and had been told that, since Imamo had been independent from the Merina kingdom until a very late date, claims to *andriana* status that went back to rulers earlier than Andriamasinavalona (1675–1710) could not possibly be authenticated. In other words, only links to the royal family in the heartland of Imerina, which are documented in written sources like the Callet's "History" could really be considered proof of status.

Now, even by these exacting standards, the *andriana* of Betafo were bona fide. They belonged to the Andrianamboninolona, the fifth grade of nobility, who originated from a region called Fieferana, to the north of the capital; the man who founded Betafo is said to have emigrated from there, and while there is no written record to confirm the story, other Andrianamboninolona accepted it. In this the inhabitants of Betafo resembled the Andriandranado, members of the sixth grade of nobility who live just across the mountains to the northwest—their ancestors are from central Imerina, and thus their names appear in the history books. This cannot be said of most other groups in the region who claim *andriana* status, since their histories, as the professor noted, went back to undocumented royal lines.

Questions of status are one of the few areas where literate traditions had much effect on popular ones—a fact that raises some troubling questions even

about a study like this, which might well end up being used as further evidence for the status of Betafo's *andriana*. It makes sense to rural people that books should weigh in on such matters because such book are themselves associated with a certain sort of power that nobles also embody; however, popular views of that sort of power are themselves profoundly ambivalent.

Lords and Soldiers

When I first moved from the archives in Antananarivo to gathering oral histories in the environs of Arivonimamo, I came armed with a fairly extensive set of terms I had become familiar with from documents from the nineteenth-century Merina kingdom. The kingdom itself was organized on the principle of *fanompoana,* or "service." Everyone had to provide *fanompoana* of some kind. Free people provided service to the sovereign; slaves, to their masters. The free male population was divided into two classes called *borizano* and *miaramila*—civilians and soldiers. *Borizano* were called up for several months of every year to perform public works; *miaramila* could be called up at any time to serve in the army. The most important nobles held estates called *menakely,* and the commoners who lived there (who could also be referred to as *menakely*) had to provide labor services for them as well. Those who held the estates were referred to as *tompomenakely* ("owners of *menakely*"). These terms were part of the essential vocabulary of power of the time; they appeared constantly in official documents; after months of reading, transcribing, and flipping through such documents, I had grown thoroughly accustomed to them. So when I first staring asking about local history, I'd occasionally find myself tossing one out "So, what kind of *fanompoana* did people used to have to do around here? Was this village part of a *menakely*? Who was its *tompomenakely*?"

Almost always, such questions seemed to give informants pause. People would respond in careful, measured tones, delivered with slightly furled brows, as if being forced to deal with a matter of some delicacy. It did not take me long to realize they did not think I was asking about royal service. They thought I was asking about slavery.

In fact, almost all the terms listed above—*miaramila, fanompoana,*[10] *menakely,* even *tompomenakely*—are now used mainly as euphemistic ways of saying "slave." In oral traditions, all power relations—or at any rate all direct relations of command—have come to be seen as so many refractions of slavery.

The identification of slaves with *miaramila* (soldiers) is particularly startling, since in the nineteenth century, slaves would have been the last people allowed to carry guns. Still, there's an obvious reason "soldiers" are people who follow orders. The relation of officers and soldiers is the quintessential relation of command,[11] and insofar as there was a consciously defined notion of giving orders, then, it was always identified with soldiers and militarized institutions. As I pointed out in the introduction, this is still true for most rural Merina today.

The ancestor of the *andriana* of Betafo is called Andrianambololona.[12] He is supposed to have migrated from Fieferana many generations before. When telling the story, descendants would almost always point out that he came accompanied by a number of "soldiers" (*miaramila*). Three of these soldiers were said to be buried under the largish granite slabs that lay at the foot of his tomb. Whenever the ancestor is removed from his tomb to be rewrappped with silk cloth, they had to be removed and wrapped as well.

Now, when I first heard about these *miaramila* I was excited and gratified, because I had longed suspected the founders of Betafo were military colonists from the region of Fieferana, established there by King Andrianampoinimerina. This looked like confirmation. I ended up having a number of thick-headed exchanges on the subject before finally figuring out who these "soldiers" were really supposed to be. A leading man from Betafo told me that Andrianambololona had been originally posted there by the central government. You know, like a functionary. "And the soldiers—were they sent with him?"

"Well, he would have soldiers to protect him." But in fact all the people here were like that, because they were all his servants (*mpanompany*).

Another time Chantal and I were talking with Ratsizafy, the old astrologer; he was trying to explain that his ancestor was really an equal of Andrianambololona—both had their *tompomenakely*—but at the same time, that unlike them, his family did not keep slaves. "What exactly were these *tompomenakely*?" I asked.

> Ratsizafy: *Tompomenakely,* they were like soldiers. However, the ones over there [next to Andrianambololona], they were the nobles' laborers [*mpiasa*].
> Chantal: They were his *menakely*?
> David [still too slow to pick up on the fact that *menakely* and *tompomenakely* are here being used as synonyms]: So, *menakely* were laborers, and *tompomenakely* soldiers?
> Ratsizafy: Look: we had our enemies—like Ingahibe Andrianamboninolona.

> They would try to attack our ancestor, so he had *menakely* to shoot back at them . . . Theirs were here to the north, ours down to the south.
> David: So it was the *menakely* who were to the south?
> Ratsizafy: Both men had *menakely* to protect them. Our ancestor had his guards over here, Andrianamboninolona too was guarded.

And so on. The term, as several of my friends ultimately had to explain, is really just a euphemism for . . . well, you know. *Mpiasa* ("workers"). *Mpanompo* ("servants") . . . "You," someone suggested—someone who had just met me and was obviously generalizing about *Vazaha*—"you probably hire people, sometimes, to help you do things. Right?" Well, it was sort of like that.[13] Even in their explanations, no one wanted to actually have to use the word *andevo,* "slave," by now a virtual obscenity.

And, I found, with just about every tomb of a famous *andriana* it was the same: the people who showed it to me would be sure to point out the slave tomb nearby. One never saw slave tombs anywhere else. It was as if the owning of slaves itself was proof of *andriana* status, and the two tombs formed a necessary complement. *Fiandrianana* consisted of the ability to command others, and relations of command were, in their essence, relations of slavery.

Probably the most famous single ancestor to the west of the capital is one Andriantsihanika, whose descendants, called the Zanak'Antitra, live scattered across southwestern Imerina. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources represent him as an *andriana* who agreed to renounce his status and become *hova* in exchange for land and protection for his followers within the dominions of a more powerful ruler (Clark 1896; Rasamuel 1948; cf Danielli 1952).[14] By mid-century, his spirit had been added to the ranks of *andriana* used by mediums to help in curing the sick, and his tomb (located not far from the highway, about halfway between Arivonimamo and the capital) was attracting pilgrims from far and wide. By this time, the story had begun to change.

A report from the '40s (Peetz 1951) already has his mediums conveying the same story I heard about him in 1990: "long ago I was asked to be a king, he says, but I refused, he says, because I did not want to have slaves" (op cit:457). This is precisely what people I knew always said about Andriantsihanika. It was his defining feature: *tsy mety manandevo,* "he wasn't willing to enslave others," or "to treat others as slaves." This, they said, was the reason he abandoned his *andriana* status.

Like most *andriana* who cure the sick, Andriantsihanika was said to have his special "soldier" or "servant"—in his case, known as Rakotomaditra—who

continues to help him in his work, and whose tomb lies next to his own. Several people assured me that Rakotomaditra had originally been Andriantsihanika's slave; his master had released him from bondage when he released all his other slaves, but Rakotomaditra continued to serve him afterward out of love and gratitude—both in life and in death.

In this case, as in many others like it, the power of *andriana* is seen as almost indistinguishable from that of a slaveholder. It's hard to be more precise because there appear to be a number of not entirely consistent notions jumbled together in people's minds. In oral traditions, "soldiers" could be simple laborers, or they could be some kind of armed retainer, or sometimes, even, soldiers. The images jumped around. Similarly with *andriana:* the picture would swing back and forth between wealthy people who owned lots of chattel slaves, and kings who treated everyone like slaves. The one constant was the notion of chains of command, of orders backed up by the threat of force. It's all so distant from the way the nineteenth-century kingdom liked to imagine itself that one can only ask what happened in the interim.[15]

Fanompoana and Slavery

Even under the nineteenth-century Merina kingdom, the giving and taking of orders was, in fact, largely confined to relations between people who weren't kin, or even neighbors. The authority of elders and ancestors was seen largely as a matter of imposing taboos and restrictions; of stopping people from acting rather than of telling them what to do. The state worked on different principles. It was just that this had not yet become a particularly salient issue.

The key term here is *fanompoana,* "service," which originally referred primarily to ritual services that subjects owed their king. In principle, though, a sovereign could demand almost any work as service (Callet 1908:718), just as masters could demand any sort of *fanompoana* from their slaves, and successive Merina rulers did their best to expand their subjects' obligations. Andrianampoinimerina (1789–1810) levied men to carry out irrigation projects around the capital; his successor Radama I (1810–1828) used it as the basis by which to recruit young men for industrial projects, a European-style army, and mission schools.

Radama's conquests—continued under his successor Ranavalona I (1828–1861)—were also responsible for bringing hundreds of thousands of slaves

into Imerina. By the early 1840s, slaves already made up about 40 percent of the Merina population. The class of truly large-scale slaveholders was, from the beginning, a small one, largely confined to the cliques of military officers who, by then, were in de facto control of the state, and some members of the high nobility, but most slaves were owned by small proprietors. In fact, it was perhaps only the poorest fifth of Merina households had no access to slave labor whatever.[16]

The spread of slave labor allowed for increasing exactions on the free population. From the time of Radama adult males not serving in the military were organized into brigades called up regularly for months of *fanompoana*. With the queen's conversion in 1869, the scope of *fanompoana* was expanded even further to include universal compulsory education in mission schools, building of and attendance in local churches, and a host of new labor obligations. Most of these appear to have been widely resented, even if most Merina accepted the underlying principle of personal service to the sovereign.

The effect on daily life was undoubtedly a vast growth in the scope of relations characterized by the direct giving and taking of orders. It is important to remember that the nineteenth-century Merina government was essentially a military government. Almost all important officials, even in the civil administration, held military rank, and civilian *fanompoana* brigades were organized in exactly the same way as military units. Even the schools—primary education became compulsory by the late 1870s—acted mainly as recruiting centers for the military. From the beginning, there is evidence that these principles of organization and conduct were considered profoundly alien from those which applied in everyday affairs.

But even within households, this was a time when more and more of the daily interaction was taking place between masters and slaves.

In the early years, the slave population was made up overwhelmingly of women and children, who were generally under the direct authority of their owners. But as the influx of slaves tapered off in the 1850s and the proportion of slaves born to their condition increased, so too did the proportion of adult males. Apparently, owners found it extremely difficult to keep grown men under their systematic control. While the matter needs much further research, most male and a substantial proportion of female slaves appear to have won a large measure of autonomy, becoming a floating stratum of itinerant craftsmen, porters, laborers, and petty traders, only occasionally under the direction of their masters. One important result of all this is that wage labor in Imerina,

whether it be the work of artisans, porters, or servants or other workers in Europeans households or enterprises, was entirely performed by slaves. They had become the only section of the Merina population willing or able to work for wages.[17]

Fanompoana as Slavery

French forces conquered Imerina in 1895; both the monarchy and the institution of slavery were abolished a year later. Numerous commentators at the time noted that the liberation of the slaves had a much more profound impact on Merina life than the fact of conquest itself. Under the new regime, *fanompoana* was the one major institution of the Merina kingdom that was left in place. In fact, forced labor probably intensified in the first years of colonial rule, with the mass levying of men for infrastructural projects such as the building of roads and bridges. Of course, under the colonial regime *fanompoana* applied equally to everyone; for masters and slaves to have had to work side by side under foreign oversight must have made an enormous impression on people as a tangible expression of their newfound equality in common subjugation to the French.

After emancipation in 1896, a French official wrote:

> Questioned on this occasion, a woman of the highest caste of nobility, rich, the owner of numerous slaves, responded with melancholy: "What does it matter if our slaves have been freed? Haven't all Malagasy, beginning with the Queen, now become slaves of the French?" (Carol 1898:38–39)

In theory, *fanompoana* was only maintained for a few years. In reality, it continued in one form or another until the late 1940s, maintained by an ever-changing series of laws and legal subterfuges (Fremigacci 1975, 1978). When colonists found it difficult to find anyone willing to sign labor contracts, additional laws were issued exempting those holding such contracts from corvée; this allowed employers to set pretty much whatever terms they cared to, making wage labor and forced labor practically the same thing (Raison 1984:180–4). This only reinforced people's aversion to anything that resembled it. Though by the '70s and '80s almost everyone in rural Imerina was forced to combine farming with crafts, petty commerce, or wage labor, the last was by far the least popular alternative. Most descendants of free people will only fall back on agricultural day-labor when there is no alternative, and even then, prefer to work on a temporary basis, and mainly for kin. In the countryside and small towns where

the vast majority of Merina live, long-term relations of wage labor between adults basically do not exist. Even in the city they are rare, outside of the very limited formal sector, which consists mainly of the government itself, and other colonial institutions. The only exception is the descendants of slaves; still a third of the population, and still considered a caste apart. With little access to land or other resources, they follow much the same occupations they did at the end of the nineteenth century, and remain the only people who are normally willing to work for wages.

In this light, it's easier to understand why the meaning of the word *fanompoana* is now closer to the English term "servitude" than "service,"[18] and wage labor, forced labor, military service—any relation based on the giving and taking of orders—considered so many refractions of slavery. Even educated people like Miadana could occasionally talk about how, for instance, "the French treated their slaves much better than the British," referring by this to policies of colonial rule.

What seems to have happened is this. The authority of elders and ancestors had always been seen as essentially negative, a matter of stopping, binding, and restraining rather than telling people what to do. The authority of kings, particularly as enshrined in *fanompoana,* was always rather different. By the end of the nineteenth century, the meaning of *fanompoana* had been broadened to include obligations to pay taxes, perform military service, attend state schools and even churches—all the institutions which were later to become the bulwarks of the colonial state. At the time, they were already seen as somewhat foreign, military, partaking of the same broad category of relations as those between masters and slaves.[19] After 1895, they became identified completely with foreign domination. Schools, offices, and workshops were seen as places in which orders were to be followed without question. "Malagasy" life came to be seen as based on utterly different principles. One reason the memory of slavery had become so embarrassing, then, was that it was a contradiction within their sense of national identity, a continual reminder that they had once treated their fellow Malagasy in the same way as foreigners were now treating them.

Indeed, if slavery set the measure of all other relations, it was not a subject people liked to talk about. To the contrary. It was more the sort of issue no one wanted to talk about but that everyone seemed to end up talking about anyway—if only in hushed tones and euphemistic language—whenever they discussed the past. It was as if the continuing presence of a population

of ex-slaves, living in close if often uncomfortable proximity with the descendants of their former masters, had made the whole issue so troubling that it had to be continually hidden, until in the end it began to seem the hidden reality behind everything.

All this was not simply a matter of abstract symbolism. While colonial phrasebooks leave one with the impression that French officials and colonists hardly spoke to their subjects in anything but the imperative voice;[20] at the same time, standards of decorum in rural villages began, as Elinor Ochs first pointed out (Ochs [Keenan] 1974:131–34), to emphasize above all the impropriety of giving orders. People will go to great lengths to avoid the appearance of ordering other people around. It was not considered a "Malagasy" way to behave, but something disrespectful, urban, French.

The reluctance to openly command others is part of a more general aversion to any relationship in which one party is seen as directing the actions of another. This aversion is the real explanation for dislike for wage labor. Most rural people nowadays will occasionally hire themselves out as day laborers, but when they do, they tend to work in teams, and teams operate autonomously. Often I found myself watching workers hired to replant or harvest someone else's rice fields animatedly discussing how best to proceed while their employer watched silently from a few yards away, not presuming to tell them how to go about their work. It was much the same with groups of men gathered around a broken bicycle or car: I could never figure out, just from watching such groups, who, if anyone, was supposed to be in charge. Even fathers would avoid openly directing their adult children; in fact, the more someone aspired to be seen as a legitimate figure of authority in a rural community, the more they would avoid to appear to be publicly giving orders.

Perhaps if one had shown up in a Merina village two hundred years ago, things would have not looked very different. But once the principle of *fanompoana* began to be identified with foreign domination, negative authority became the only kind people took to be wholly legitimate. To be Malagasy came to mean rejecting entanglement in relations of command as far as it was practical to do so.

Witches, Charms, and Hidden Dangers

Madagascar, of course, is no longer a French colony, but as I've already said, these attitudes have by no means disappeared. "Simple people" still tend to see

the government and governing class as existing at a certain fundamental remove from "Malagasy" life.[21] Even in the country, though, relations of command have not been by any means eliminated. They continue to exist, if often in rather euphemistic forms, in any number of different aspects of daily life. Teachers and bureaucrats have affected a more consensual, "Malagasy" style since independence, but the schools and offices are basically the same. Malagasy do hire one another, if rarely for very long; elders do direct other people's actions, if usually indirectly or under a consensual veneer. Like memories of slavery, relations of command in everyday life tend to be suppressed and hidden, and as such, they become social issues much more important than they would otherwise have been.

The result was a social milieu teeming with hidden purposes, where everyone (elders most of all perhaps) were trying to get others to do things without being able to fully acknowledge they were doing it. One measure was new stories about dangerous medicine that began to circulate since the colonial period (Graeber 1996c)—this was always one of the main ways in which people's suspicions about the dangers lurking in their social world tended to take concrete form. All sorts of rumors appeared, unprecedented in the nineteenth century, all of which centered on *ody* that, in one way or another, turned people into slaves. There were charms used to protect fields that would seize thieves that entered into them at night and force them to spend the night digging ditches or carrying baskets of manure. There were women who enslaved men by means of love medicine (*ody fitia*), and had them working constantly to enrich them, or otherwise exploiting them; there was *fanainga lavitra,* a charm could take possession of its victims, however far away, and compel them to travel to their summoner by the quickest means available, only regaining consciousness when they arrived . . .

Even more significant were shifts in ideas about witches, the ultimate embodiments of moral evil. In the nineteenth century, witches were mainly pictured as women who prowled about villages at night in bands, dancing naked on tombs to revile the dead, taunting the sick by rapping on their doors and windows, working elaborate spells to make their enemies waste away and die (Haile 1893:11). By the twentieth century, though, new stories began to circulate about the origins of such witches. They were women who had used too much love medicine. Having acquired *ody* to bend others to their will, they found themselves, instead, possessed by the power of their own medicine, which seized them and forced them to assemble in night covens. And what

witches did to their victims also changed. They still danced on tombs and knocked on shutters, but their main activity was now riding men like horses. Witches enchant any men they meet on the road at night, mount on their backs and drive them along until dawn; make them eat dirt or otherwise abase themselves; then finally abandon them, filthy and exhausted, on their doorsteps before dawn. It was as if the ultimate nightmare fantasy of Merina society had become the sheer power to dominate and control the actions of others—the pure abstract intentionality of the spirit behind the charm—burst free from all controls.

NEGATIVE AUTHORITY

3

The reader might by now be left with the impression that the inhabitants of rural Imerina are simply anti-authoritarian. Nothing could be further from the truth.

First of all, the attitude described in the last section, however pervasive, is only that: an attitude. It is rarely formulated explicitly. No one ever told me "It is wrong to tell others what to do," or "We Malagasy do not believe in giving orders." That would have been palpably absurd, since people do in fact give each other orders all the time—particularly women, who in households are always sending children off on errands, assigning each other tasks, assigning tasks to their menfolk. It is mainly in public contexts that orders are considered inappropriate.

Second of all, the authority of elders and ancestors is considered—especially in public contexts—absolutely legitimate, indeed, as the very foundation of social order. Elders and ancestors are seen as legitimate, however, largely because they are *not* seen as operating like kings (or for that matter, bossy women.) Rather than telling others what to do, they are seen as properly intervening in human affairs in order to tell others what not to do. This is not to say that this sort of "negative authority," as I call it, is not fraught with ambivalences of its own.[1] To understand why that is, however, and how these structures of legitimate authority operate more generally, one has to begin by understanding the Merina kinship system.

Descent Groups

Merina descent groups (which Bloch calls demes[2]) are structured around tombs.[3] Tombs—old earthen tombs or newer, concrete ones—are everywhere

in the Merina countryside; they are the chief way history becomes inscribed on the landscape. Every deme has its ancestral territory, and its one most ancient tomb, that of its "great ancestor" or *razambe*, and a number of others that are seen as having spun off from it. All are within that deme's ancestral territory. Members include anyone who is descended from that ancestor who also chooses to be buried in one of the tombs—they need never have actually lived on the deme's territory, though to qualify for access to a tomb, one should at least hold on to a rice field or two in the territory, a piece of the ancestral land.

There are all sorts of rules as to who can and cannot be buried in what tomb, but most people have a very wide range of choices: at the very least, between their mother's and father's tomb, and usually, between four or five different tombs. The kinship system is thus cognatic, marital residence is flexible, everyone knows other places they could live, other families they could belong to, other communities where they might be able to stake some kind of claim. Most young people spend at least some time in the city, or moving about between different relatives. As a result, becoming a significant rural elder or ancestor is a matter of pulling people together: in practice, this above all means acquiring enough land and property to prevent one's children and grandchildren from drifting away. Hence, in rhetoric, tombs are often represented as fixed centers, stones of memory from which children tend to drift away in all directions. At the most abstract, ancestral authority is a matter of constraint, binding, holding people in.

Again, space does not allow a detailed discussion, but there is a basic contradiction between the interests of fathers and sons. Even in the pre-colonial nineteenth century the typical fairy-tale success story featured a young man who abandoned his home to seek his fortunes, acquired wealth, translated it into land and tombs, and then prevented his own children from doing as he did, so that they would maintain his memory on death. If a father managed to become a famous *razambe,* the chief ancestor of an important tomb, it almost necessarily meant obscurity for his children. Yet at the same time, most of the important men in a given community derived much of their authority from the memory of a father or grandfather who was a prominent elder—one who would eventually have to be forgotten if their own names were to endure.[4]

The contradiction is played out, in part, by the dual representation of ancestors: alternately, as benevolent figures who give "blessings" to the living, or as terrifying ghosts that haunt the neighborhood of tombs and murder children.

It is perhaps most clearly played out in *famadihana*: rituals in which the bodies of the ancestors are removed from their tombs in order to be given new silk shrouds (called *lambamena*). These are the principal occasions in which ancestors are remembered, and relations between the living and the dead reworked and reestablished. The ancestors, it is said, would come in a dream to a descendant, complaining of being cold and demanding to be wrapped in new shrouds.

Irina, a woman from Betafo told me that, some sixty years before, in 1931, her ancestor Andrianambololona had appeared in a dream to one of his descendants to demand they hold a *famadihana*. This, she said, had long been his custom: he would appear to announce he and the other occupants of the tomb were cold, and needed to be taken out and wrapped in new silk mantles (*lambamena*). As always, his descendants quickly got together and organized the ritual, but, in their hurry perhaps, forgot to exhume the bodies of the three "soldiers" buried at the foot of the tomb. "The afternoon after they'd finished," she said, "the town suddenly caught fire and burned to the ground." The next morning he appeared again "and said: 'if you don't wrap us all, next time I'll kill you outright . . .' So they got the tombs ready again and rewrapped them."

Augustin, the former *President Fokontany*, told me an even more extreme version. In his, there had already been a fire, which had destroyed half the houses on *tampon-tanana,* in the center of Betafo, when the survivors organized the ceremony. Unfortunately, since the tomb was constructed in a very archaic way, with the bodies at the bottom of a deep tunnel, they never noticed the body of Andrianambololona's daughter.

> Augustin: When they were carrying out the *famadihana* they completely forgot about his daughter. They didn't notice her when they were wrapping the bodies. So afterwards the fire came again; for a second time the houses burned. Afterwards, the woman's father appeared to Razafindrazaka and said, "Why didn't you wrap my child?" Right afterwards he appeared to give a sign to the inhabitants.
>
> This Razafindrazaka is dead now, but at the time, he was the real elder in charge of taking care of that ancestor. So that's who he appeared to: "We're still cold," said Andrianambololona, "because my daughter hasn't been wrapped with cloth."
>
> He had already murdered some of them, and now he said, "There will be more disasters to come in the future, if you don't wrap us."

As we shall see, the fire of 1931 is seen to mark a decisive moment in the history of Betafo. It was the disaster which put a final end to Betafo's ancient glory. The point here is that it illustrates the degree to which ancestral memories

are seen as an imposition on the living, an imposition backed by the threat of terrible punishment. Most ancestors, perhaps, were not quite so arbitrary and violent (the woman herself remarked that Andrianambololona was unusually "arrogant and cruel"),[5] but in so far as ancestors intervened in the lives of their descendants, it was almost always to constrain or attack them.

In the countryside, at least, ancestral memories were the organizing principles of all significant local groups, and the basis of all authority within them. As the embodiments of the moral unity of the little communities made up of their descendants, they were the ultimate guarantors of moral good—though even here, people were a bit uneasy about the means by which they did so: largely, by imposing rules that were always framed as "taboos" (*fady*), and mercilessly punishing transgressors. But in so far as they were simply trying to preserve their own, individual, memories, this violence became even more difficult to justify—and, as we will see, it became very hard to maintain a patina of sanctity around ancestors at all.

In fact, the symbolism of constraint is played out even at the moment of the ritual rewrapping of corpses. I've argued (Graeber 1995) that what *famadihana* really do is to covertly reverse the direction of this constraint and violence, so that it is turned against ancestors. The word *famadihana* in fact means, among other things, "reversal" or even "betrayal." While in theory such rituals are held to memorialize the dead, what they actually do is allow them to be forgotten. Over the course of the rituals the dead are danced with, manhandled, tied extremely forcefully with ropes or ties, and thus reduced to dust inside the hard silk mantles, then ritually "locked" inside their tombs—again, a form of constraint continuous with a form of violence. The destruction of the bodies of the dead also allows their names to be forgotten, which most ancestors are, as soon as those who knew them in life have also died; ancestors fading from memory are eventually consolidated in the same cloth with ones whose memories are more likely to endure.

Parents and Elders

Fathers, unlike mothers, rarely gave orders to children. Sometimes people would tell me that fathers could "command" (*mibaiko*) their children while the latter were still economically dependent—that is, before they married and received land of their own—but the implication always was that this was a simple recognition of reality, a matter of compulsion and not legitimate authority.

Once a son was independent, "a father could give orders if he liked, but that didn't mean the son would have to follow them." A community's most respected figures, its elders or *Ray amandReny*,[6] were of an age where their children were likely to be independent. Their authority, instead, was seen as drawing on that of ancestors, and it took two quintessential forms: admonition (*anatra*), and cursing (*ozona*).

Even a man whose children were independent could publicly "admonish" them. In fact it was felt that any respectable elder should be able to intervene with appropriate admonitions when confronted with unruly or stubbornly disobedient youth. Proper *anatra* should be couched in a highly conventionalized, proverbial language akin to formal oratory (*kabary*), which was felt to be intrinsically persuasive in itself. The ability to use such language was considered one of the defining features of an elder (cf. Bloch 1971; 1975; 1985), but most people I knew insisted that almost no one really knew how to do it any more. Every time there was a fight or public quarrel between kin I would hear people sighing that if this were any proper sort of community, there would be elders capable of straightening such things out. In fact, this is perhaps the archetypal occasion for such admonition: when young people, driven by selfish and individualistic motives, end up quarreling or even coming to blows, and a figure of authority appears to remind them that it is the duty of kin to show respect for their ancestors by behaving decently. And, in fact, on those occasions when I did see *anatra* unambiguously employed, this was more or less the situation. The imagery, I found, tended to emphasize containment in space: unruly youth were inevitably likened to birds (*vorona manan'elatra*) who fly off in all directions, ignoring their duty to God and the ancestors, abandoning their parents and ancestral lands, or at least, forgetting their ancestral responsibilities. Now, as Maurice Bloch (1975) has pointed out, this is not a form of speech that anyone would consider arguing with. When an older person—especially a parent—breaks into this mode of discourse, everyone falls silent and looks a little bit embarrassed and chastened; they at least make a show of accommodation. If they didn't, it would be taken as a sign that they were not completely sane.

I witnessed some examples of this myself. One day I was sitting in Armand's room in Arivonimamo, chatting with Nety and several of Armand's siblings, when his mother appeared, carrying a large basket of supplies she was intending to carry to her house in a village half an hour's walk away. She sat on the edge of the bed next to Armand and began talking about quarrels

within the family. At first her tone was conversational, if rather weary, as she described how endless it all seemed, how indignant she became when her children tried to draw her in. At one point, she said, she herself had practically ended up fighting with one of her daughters, and she was a woman who *hated* fights. As she went on, her voice became more cadenced, rhythmic; more verbal figures started appearing in it. As your mother, she said, I cannot love one of you more than any other. I love you all equally. ("Well," Nety said helpfully, "how can you argue with that?") By this time everyone was staring at the ground and looking slightly sheepish.

She continues:

> But this is my final word, I say. If you love all your kin, whether your brothers or your sisters, I say, then I am still living, here, to bind you all together, and to give you my blessing by the coin and by the stone.[7] And if you no longer love your kin, I say, and you are all able to support yourselves, then go. Go then, all of you, on the highway that is straight for you, because you all have long wings, I say. You are all birds with long wings, so go and do what you must to make your living. But beware of evil, because disaster hangs above the heads of each and every one of you.

And if you want to all end up clubbing each other with cudgels, she said, do that too; but she refused to stand in judgment and say which was more to blame than any other. After a while, she returned to a more conversational mode, discussing particulars with Armand and Nety, who as eldest had the greatest right to speak. Whenever things seemed about to reach a point of contention, though, she'd begin to slip back into *anatra* (signaled especially by references to God and the ancestors and the tell-tale "I say") and opposition would melt away.

When people used the word *baiko* ("command"), they were almost always talking about relations based ultimately on force—everything would always go back to talk of property rights, land registration. Tribunals, gendarmes, and prisons lurked not far in the background—perhaps not very convincingly, since everyone knew the state would not really intervene, but still, those were the images. *Anatra* had no such violent implications. It was seen as an appeal to conscience, to the hearer's intrinsic sense of right and wrong. Asking the hearer to "remember" the ancestors was reminding her of the very ground of her being.

With *ozona,* or "cursing," one returns to compulsion once again. This was the ultimate sanction of ancestral authority.

Any elder could admonish a younger person, but *ozona* was effective only

on one's own descendants.[8] It was a power to be invoked only if a child or grandchild proved utterly resistant to admonition. While I only heard of two or three instances of this actually happening, the possibility was always being alluded to. Curses were always said to take the same form, which was always a negative formulation: "You will never have any children," "You will never find prosperity in your life," or "You will never enter the family tomb." In other words, one did not punish a descendant by directly harming them—inflicting a disease, or causing them to lose the wealth they did have—but instead by imposing a constraint, by specifying something they will never be able to do.

This is perfectly consistent with the other meaning of the verb "to curse" (*manozona*), which is "to impose a taboo on someone." This too was something one could only do to one's own descendants, and members of any deme would share a certain set of *fady,* or taboos, assumed to have originally been imposed this way. Ancestral taboos could be said to fall into two types. Some were rules meant to ensure the maintenance of a harmonious and bounded group. The basic list varied little from deme to deme: it is *fady* to steal from kin, to sell land to outsiders; usually, to dabble in dangerous forms of medicine; always, to marry a descendant of slaves. Others were more arbitrary. There would often be some neighboring deme, of roughly equal status, which descendants were forbidden to marry. There was inevitably a set of food taboos—certain animals and plants descendants had to avoid under certain conditions, restrictions which especially tended to focus on the consumption of onions[9] and pork. All ancestral regulations tended to be phrased negatively, as *fady,*[10] and since it is almost exclusively through enforcing *fady* that ancestors played a role in their descendant's daily lives, I think it's no exaggeration to say that the power to impose restrictions (*ozona*) was the very essence of ancestral authority.

But this fact makes the stories concerning the origin of *fady*—there are almost always such stories—all the more surprising. Most were overtly comic, clearly intended to poke fun at their ancestral protagonists. Take for example, the Children of Andriamasoandro, who live directly to the west of Betafo, who are famous for not being allowed to eat a certain type of caterpillar called *bokana.*[11] There's a story which explains why; a story I was told repeatedly, and enthusiastically, anytime anyone had the slightest excuse. When their ancestor, Andriamasoandro, first arrived in the territory, a sudden brush fire sent thousands of caterpillars swarming from the surrounding trees. He immediately ran out and started scooping up handfuls to eat, stuffing himself continually

until he became completely sick—whereupon, realizing what a foolish thing he had done, he cursed his descendants never to eat another caterpillar again.

Irina told me the same kind of story to explain her deme's *fady* on pork and garlic: one of their ancestors was addicted to the stuff.

> Irina: He was immensely fat they say—so they say mind you, I don't know if this is really true or not—but he still kept eating the stuff anyway. He didn't want anything else to eat with his rice but that, and really cooked up good. So his body split open, I guess. He was so fat he burst apart and died.[12]

Thus inspiring *ozona* on the part of his surviving kin . . .

Similarly, many of the stories I heard about the origins of marriage taboo seemed to go out of their way to make the ancestors absurd. The most common motif has the ancestors of the two groups quarreling over a piece of land or somesuch, and agreeing to stage a fight (between their bulls, or dogs, or in one case the ancestors themselves held a kicking contest) to determine the winner. When the loser refused to keep the deal, they both ended up cursing their descendants never to marry the descendants of the other. Often, the narrators don't make much of a secret of what they thought of such behavior; as in the case of the young man who explained to me the origins of a *fady* on marriage between his own deme, the Andrianamboninolona of Betafo and these same Andriamasoandro, one he claimed had since been abandoned:

> Young man: So they both cheated, and one who was beaten started the cursing. What a bunch of idiots! [Laughs] Then I guess later on their descendants came to their senses and said, "Oh, what a stupid thing that all was—let's just mix together now."

This is admittedly about a taboo that is no longer (completely) observed, but the tone is not unusual. In stories like this, the ancestors are almost always made to seem at least a little bit ridiculous.

The vast majority of the stories I heard about taboos were not about their origins, but the consequences of violating them. These stories were quite serious; even frightening. Someone grew garlic where he shouldn't have: his rice was destroyed by hail. Someone else ate goat meat and swelled up to twice his normal size; or stole from his cousins and so sank into poverty; or tried to transfer a body from the family tomb in violation of its regulations and was blasted by lightning and died.[13] It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of these little narratives of transgression and retribution. Only a handful of old men had more than the sketchiest knowledge of their deme's

history, but there was no one, young or old, male or female, who could not recount a dozen of these stories. And it was almost exclusively these stories that described how ancestral power actually manifested itself to living people, how ancestors continued to play a direct role in the daily lives of their descendants. The remarkable thing is that when they did, it was almost always by attacking them—in fact, by actions which, had they been carried out by a living person, would have been instantly condemned as the most reprehensible kind of witchcraft.

No one would openly suggest that ancestors were anything like witches.[14] In public discourse, older men particularly—especially prominent ones on the way to someday becoming ancestors themselves—always represented them as the benevolent guarantors of the unity and moral integrity of their descendants.[15] But they would also usually grow noticeably uncomfortable when the subject of ancestral retribution came up. It seemed to be mainly women who passed these stories on. And most of the women I spoke to did not hesitate to express their opinions about the ancestors' behavior—in fact, the word that came up most often in talking about them, *masiaka,* means "savage," "violent," or "cruel." Some older and more venerable women would try to cast the issue in moralistic terms—the ancestors are merciless in punishing evil-doers—but most narrators were keenly aware of the arbitrary nature of these restrictions, as the tenor of the stories about their origins make abundantly clear.

Ancestors, Then

To recap:

Within the household, women would issue orders freely. Children were sent off on errands, older sisters directed their juniors in washing clothes or taking care of infants, mothers directed their daughters in cooking or sent their sons to mind the cows. All this is done with relatively little circumlocution. But as Elinor Ochs (1974) has already written, there is a kind of continuum of verbal styles: at one extreme is the kind of direct, simple speech women use at home, on the other, elaborate formal genres such as *kabary* (or *anatra*), identified with prominent men and public occasions, a form of rhetoric where one shows respect to one's listeners by being subtle and indirect. Outside the household, "orders" always implied relations of legality and force, ways that Malagasy people should not really be treating each other. Instead, authority should properly reside in the ability to assert moral values in formal

rhetoric, and to admonish those who did not abide by them. This is why I call it "negative": it was always seen as a matter of preventing or restraining others from acting, rather than inspiring or initiating action. Another way to put this would be that there was no notion—or anyway, no positively valued one—of what in English would be called "leadership." The proper role of public figures was not to initiate projects of action, but to maintain the solidarity of a group by intervening to stop individuals from engaging in action likely to disrupt it.

Orders, then, were of a way of making people do things, based on an ultimate appeal to violence. Admonition was a matter of stopping them from doing things, by an appeal to conscience—usually, this meant reminding them of the fact that they were all members of the same moral community. Still, the threat of ancestral violence was always lurking in the background. Most moral communities were based on ancestry; they were maintained by the imposition of restrictions backed up by the constant threat of punishment.

The result is that negative authority had a double valence. On the one hand, it could work by appealing to similarities (as in *anatra*), to one's identity with the ancestors who made one who one is. On the other, it reproduced something like the model of a group of living descendants being made into a community of equals in relation to an overarching, and somewhat arbitrary, force of violence. (In this case, that force is alien at least in so far as the people who make it up are dead.) In either case, ancestral authority was seen as acting by binding, constraining, restricting; especially, on containing people in space. Communities were centered on stone tombs fixed in the ancestral earth, seen as stones of memory from which young people and descendants had a constant tendency to take wing and fly away. It was a tension which worked itself out above all in *famadihana*, where, after imbibing huge quantities of rum, descendants reversed the normal direction of constraint by removing the ancestors' bodies from their tombs to tie on new shrouds—a process of tying that was carried out so violently that the bodies literally fell apart, so that they could be safely "locked" back in the tomb.

Oaths, Ordeals, Blood Brotherhood

What, then, of people who aren't of the same descent? Almost anyone in a Merina village was likely to have at least a few neighbors who she did not

consider even remotely related, and many communities were, like Betafo, made up of a several groups of entirely different ancestry. How did one invoke the notion of a moral community then?

This was always a problem. But there were, generally, two ways to deal with it. First, one could simply pretend. Villagers would tend to act as if everyone they dealt with on a day to day basis is kin (*havana*) of some sort or another, even if they would admit privately that it wasn't really true (Bloch 1971:99–102). Second, there were certain formal rituals which were meant to create ties between unrelated people: *fatidra,* or "blood-brotherhood," which joined two individuals, and collective ordeals, or *fitsitsihina*[16] which joined together local groups (Cousins 1963:91–95, Callet 1908:831–851). In either case, the method was the same: to create mutual obligations between people by creating some kind of overarching power of violence, which would, like ancestors, threaten terrible punishments.

In this case too, the more a person identified with ancestral authority, the more they tried to cover up the element of violence. The whole subject of ordeals was fraught with euphemism. I think it would be useful to give an illustration: an account told me during an early visit to Andrianony, the *mainty* quarter of Betafo.

I had come in search of Augustin, the former *President Fokontany*, only to discover that he wasn't in. Instead I was introduced to his cousin, Jean Marie. Jean Marie reminded me a bit of Armand: he was in his thirties, had the same robust and self-confident manner, the same tendency to tout traditional male virtues, though he also had a constant air of playful irony Armand lacked—and was much more guarded and suspicious. We sat down on a large flat rock near the *barage,* a little concrete dam set on the watercourse that runs north of the village; I pulled out a pack of expensive Malagasy cigarettes, lit one, offered him another, set the pack on the rock between us with a gesture intended to invite him to help himself—and he asked me what sort of thing I was interested in learning about. I had only just heard Miadana's account of the disastrous ordeal of 1987. It seemed a good illustration. "Customs", I said. "Take the custom of placing gold and ancestral earth in water and drinking it, which I believe it called *fitsitsihina,* 'imprecations.' Customs like that I find very interesting."

Well, in order to understand imprecations, began Jean Marie, you have to first understand something about *fatidra,* or blood brotherhood.

Jean Marie: Two people love each other, so they do a *fatidra* together. The *fatidra* is done by means of imprecations (*fitsitsihana*).

Say it's you and me performing the *fatidra*. This is how the drawing of blood is done: we take a piece of liver, and put it on the winnowing basket used for imprecations (*sahafa fitsitsihana*). And we two curse each other . . . Then, if for example it's David and I who've performed a *fatidra* to become brothers: whatever I possess, no matter what it may be, and everything you yourself may own; we can't hide it from each other, because we've become like brothers from one womb.

The liver is cut up in the winnowing basket (it's cooked just a bit on the fire because you know it's not the custom to eat raw liver, because it's cats that eat raw liver). It's heated up a little bit, braised a bit, and cut up on the winnowing basket. Then the blood is dripped on, and smeared into the chopped meat, which is daubed with a bit of the blood. Then my share too is chopped and daubed there. And from then on, David and I are like brothers from one womb—and we can't hide anything from each other.

This was the custom of people in the olden times: mutual love. And in these times, if I don't have enough to live on—but you, however, do—then you can't hide anything from me. You say "Jean Marie, I have a match here with me, but you have no match to light!" You have to help me out.

Such was the *fatidra* in olden times: mutual love and imprecations.

And now, in the present day, as for what you were referring to earlier—all that "taking from the tomb" (*mifandray fasana*), "adding gold" and the rest: well, say for example David's matches were to disappear. But when David's matches and cigarettes were lost, there was no one else around except us here. Still, I'm not willing to say "It was I who hid your things." I won't produce the matches, because I like the matches. I like those cigarettes of yours. So I hid them to keep for myself. But you, you're sad[17] because you didn't give me those things, I just went off and stole them.

So "lets let's go take dust from each other's tombs" say those people who all "didn't take it."

So they bring gold and a needle . . .

David: And a needle?

Jean Marie: Yes, and they take earth from the mouth of the tomb. And they say "You among the ancestors" (if it's at the tomb, for instance), "our family has come here before you ancestors who are buried here, So-and-so and So-and-so, because, as you know, my things are lost. I have a grievance against whoever took this thing. But I won't just go around accusing people: rather, let them be judged by the needle and the tomb dust which we've put together here as imprecations." Then they put water in the plate, and take the earth and the needle and the gold, and put that in, and everybody drinks some.

In olden times, this was *masina* [sacred, effective]. Absolutely *masina.* And back in those days of old, there was no thievery, because people all trusted one another. Nowadays, however, there are many who end up working for others, and they end up stealing. But in former times that was really how it was.

This is a remarkable presentation, one which manages to be at the same time bold (in teasing me) and extremely squeamish.

On one level, the whole thing was an extended comment on my would-be egalitarian gesture of offering to share the cigarettes: here I was, a foreigner of doubtless unimaginable wealth, suggesting that—at least while we are sitting there—we should treat my luxury cigarettes as common property. Anyway it provided an irresistible point of departure when I started asking about customs meant to create relations of commonality between radically different kinds of people. But the example also opened up on some real tensions—questions about how even genuine kin should deal with one another. No one (such is the formal principle) has the right to turn down a request for help from a kinsman if that request is based on legitimate needs. But if so, everything then depends on how one defines a legitimate need. Define it expansively enough, and one would justify leveling all differences of property. At the same time, everyone also insisted it was very wrong for kin to steal from one another, a stipulation clearly meant to maintain those same distinctions.

The talk of transparency and openness ("stealing" becomes "hiding") is typical of this sort of moral rhetoric—at least in part, it is a way of papering over such ambiguities. Though, Jean Marie is not really disguising the fact that there may be a problem here. What his account is really suppressing is references to physical violence.

This is what I mean by "squeamish." The account veers aside each time it threatens to approach any act that remotely resembles violence: say, the fact that the two parties cut their skins to obtain the blood they place in the liver, or even, the fact that they eat the liver afterward. Certainly he never mentions what the imprecations themselves actually consist of. In fact, nineteenth-century sources (Ellis 1835 1:187–190; Callet 1908:851; Cousins 1968:93–4; Sibree 1875:223–227) provide some examples of the actual words. Both parties invoke "Lord Fatidra" (Andriampatitra, a mere personification of the power of the ritual) and vow that they will never fail to provide food when the other is hungry, or to protect the other when in danger. Usually the description of obligations is relatively brief; most of the invocations consist of elaborate and detailed descriptions of the disasters—death, famine, devastation—that should befall those who fail to live up to them.[18]

No one I knew could provide such detail; the custom, I was told, is not much practiced any more. But everyone agreed that *fatidra* is a means to bind people together in a relation similar to kinship, and also seemed aware of the ultimate point: that by taking in each others' blood and pronouncing the

stated imprecations, the parties to a *fatidra* create a force which acts in the same way ancestors would: by threatening to destroy them if they do not behave properly toward each other. And like Jean Marie, everyone recognized that communal ordeals—which were still carried out—were basically the same thing.

One of the more common forms in fact had almost exactly the same form: instead of all drinking water, everyone in the community partook of a piece of liver over which imprecations have been pronounced.[19] In either case the principle is similar: while Jean Marie is again reluctant to enter into details, the "imprecations" themselves again consist of invocations, addressed to an invisible power ("God and the ancestors," or occasionally, some specific ancestor) which is asked to destroy anyone who has violated the principles of communal morality.

This ritual logic has been around a long time. Nineteenth-century kings used it when they made their subjects take oaths of loyalty, arranging symbolic objects, calling on the invisible powers to destroy them should they betray their obligations to the king.[20] Like *fatidra*, then, these created moral ties, and mutual responsibilities. Royal poison ordeals, called *tangena*—after the nut-bearing plant which provided the poison—were meant to detect and punish those who had transgressed them.[21]

In minor cases, *tangena* could be given to a chicken or a dog; in major ones, directly to the suspect. As one missionary source puts it, *tangena*

> was used chiefly for the detection of infamous crimes when ordinary evidence could not be obtained, such as witchcraft and treason; and it was believed that there was inherent in the fruit some supernatural power, a kind of "searcher of the hearts," which entered into the suspected person, and either cleared him of guilt or convicted him. The mode in which it was administered was by giving a portion of two nuts rubbed down in water or in the juice of a banana, the culprit having previously eaten a little rice and swallowed three small square-shaped pieces of a fowl's skin. Tepid water was after a few minutes administered to cause vomiting, and the proof of innocence was the rejection of these three pieces uninjured. (Sibree 1875:282)

Those found guilty were, in most instances, immediately pounded to death with *fanoto:* the heavy wood poles used for beating unhusked rice. Though "even if the ordeal was fairly administered," Sibree adds (op cit.), "there was an amount of risk of poisoning"; and on occasion, when *tangena* was given en masse to whole villages suspected of disloyalty—as often happened during

the reigns of Andrianampoinimerina and Ranavalona I—hundreds might die as a result.

Anyone found guilty by the *tangena* was considered a witch and hence could not be buried in the family tomb. They were buried in simple graves and forgotten.

Tangena, perhaps even more than the *sampy*, became something of a cause celebre in the nineteenth century. In the eyes of Christian missionaries, it was not only a symbol of "heathenism," but of royal brutality as well. Radama II abolished the use of *tangena* amongst other judicial reforms in 1861. But, abandoned for over a century, the poison oracle still holds a great place in the popular imagination. Most of the people I knew could have repeated the basic facts of Sibree's above account almost verbatim. *Tangena* was considered one of the defining institutions of "Malagasy times" (*tany gasy*).[22]

Still, *tangena* was not—and never has been—entirely distinguished from other forms of ordeal. People regularly spoke of them as if they were at best slightly different aspects of the same thing.[23] The basic notion—of having people call on a higher power to visit destruction on them if they were guilty—was precisely the same. The main difference was that in contemporary *fitsitsihina,* that power is usually identified with the ancestors; in *tangena*, like *fatrida*, it was a complete abstraction, an invisible conscious force which existed only to observe and punish.[24] But one result of their identification is that all ordeals in general are seen as in a sense belonging to *tany gasy.* As such, they become emblems for an imagined, one-time communal solidarity believed to have since frayed or largely disappeared. Certainly this was true in Betafo, where Jean Marie began by talking of *fitsitishina* as if it were abandoned long ago, despite the fact that I had begun by asking about one conducted two years before.

True, there had been a broad revival of ordeals in the years just preceding my arrival, and people were a bit reluctant to admit this to an outsider. But there was also a much broader tendency to represent all "Malagasy" political institutions as things of the past. In ancient villages, for instance, residents would usually show me the *kianja,* a cleared space said to have been the gathering place for meetings, oratory, and other public business—in former times. Occasionally I would later learn they were still used for exactly the same purposes, but no one would spontaneously mention this, or in fact volunteer any information on current meeting-places. In so far as people were willing to

admit to collective action—politics—it was always in the past. The result was, as we will see, is that such tokens of history were often treated as if they still retained a power to act all of their own accord.

More on the Merina Social Contract

Here is Armand talking about ordeals in Parson's *hotely* in the marketplace of Arivonimamo:

> Armand: . . . and they made their imprecations. *Tangena* and chicken-liver—I mean, chicken skin. Because if you eat that, it doesn't take long: just one week and if you're a witch, you just die. And that's how you get those people buried in "witch-tombs."[25]
> Parson: And witches, if they're fed liver and *tangen* nowadays, what happens?
> Armand: But nowadays, you know, nowadays there's no more unity of purpose (*firaisan-kina*). None! Back then, the unity of purpose in one place was a really powerful thing. Now our town is broken into four or five factions—if there's, say, a funeral, it's each faction to themselves. But it didn't used to be that way. Even if it was just slaughtering an animal or some little thing like that, everyone in town would come.
>
> I still remember it well. Say someone killed a pig for Christmas: we'd come and take our choice of cut. But now that doesn't happen. That's why it no longer stands: if there's a witch, no one will believe it, because—and this includes me—people don't trust each other any more.
> David: But aren't there still witches?
> Armand: There are, there are! Where's there a town without witches? There's no such thing! They must exist. But they're not detected.

The notion of *firaisan-kina,* or "unity of purpose," is, as much as transparency, central to Merina notions of moral community. It ties in to a broader conception in which individual action is generically suspect. This is extended even (in fact, especially) to individual leadership: collective action and collective projects should ideally stem not from some leader's initiative but arise spontaneously from the unity of intention of a solidary moral group.

Hence, the practice of carrying out collective ordeals can itself be taken as a sign of an essentially solidary, unified community. The logic might seem puzzling at first (anyway, it did to me): after all, if it were not for witchcraft—which is the very definition of anti-social behavior—ordeals would be unnecessary. But in a community as factionalized as Betafo, Armand is saying, such collective ritual cleansing is impossible. The witches exist, but they remain hidden because no one trusts each other enough to do what's necessary to root them out.

To really understand Armand's reasoning, though, it would pay to look in a little more detail at the history of judicial institutions in Imerina—and the role they have played in the definition of communities. In particular, I want to look at the term *fokon'olona,* which I have already translated "communal assembly."

By at least the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become a common custom for the inhabitants of a number of adjacent villages—which may or may not have traced common descent—to establish a series of rules to help regulate their mutual relations. Such compacts were called "*fokon'olona* agreements" (*fanekenem-pokon'olona*), and they mainly consisted of a list of fines to be levied against thieves, or those who failed to participate in collective projects like the maintenance of irrigation works. To seal the agreement, an ox or sheep would be killed in sacrifice, and a standing stone raised, usually in the *kianja* of the central village. The stone was meant to serve as a memorial, and in a sense, as the concrete embodiment of the agreement afterward, it would also become the place where the *fokon'olona* would meet for resolving disputes and carrying out ordeals (cf. Julien 1905, Condominas 1960:84–86; Bloch 1971b; Raison 1991:382–83).[26]

In the existing literature on Madagascar, the word *fokon'olona* is often used as if it referred to a concrete institution—a certain type of popular organization with its own historical origins, its own institutional history.[27] A lot of the debates about "the origin of the *fokon'olona,*" or "historical transformations of the *fokon'olona,*" seem to me entirely misplaced. In everyday speech, "*fokon'olona*" really just means "everybody." Or, a more specific definition would be "everybody who lives in a particular locality, especially when they are all gathered together regardless of descent." There is no reason to believe this has not always been so. "*Fokon'olona*" refers not so much to an institution as a principle: the principle that matters of local concern, whether it be the maintenance of drainage ditches or the resolution of disputes, should be resolved by bringing together everyone who lives in the locality to discuss them—rather than, say, by delegating authority to mediators, office-holders, or any kind of representatives[28]—and also, a series of broad principles concerning how people should conduct themselves on such occasions.

Fokon'olona meetings, then, are local gatherings, their scale varying with the scope of the problem they gather to resolve. The root principle seems to be that anyone affected by the decision has a right to take part in the debate. They are not based on descent, though it may often be that all the people assembled

are *havana,* or kin, and even if they are not, discussion is often carried out in what might be called a kinship idiom, as if they were. But there is also a certain ideology of voluntary agreement which might be considered particular to the notion of a "*fokon'olona,*" and which stands explicitly apart from the ascriptive nature of kinship.

The word "*fanekena,*" "agreement," is derived from the verb "*manaiky*," "to agree." In modern Malagasy at least it can mean "contract," "treaty," or "covenant." But at its broadest, the notion of agreement here goes well beyond that implied by the English word, since it is not limited to assent to some specific proposition, but can refer to a more general state of concord. When a *fokon'olona* meets to resolve a dispute—or even in arguments within a household—people are always saying "I won't agree unless . . ." (*izaho tsy manaiky raha tsy . . .*)—even though they haven't been asked to agree to anything. What it means is that the speaker is dissatisfied with something, and wants everyone to know she is not to be considered in a state of accord with her fellows until the cause of her dissatisfaction has been addressed. The aim of deliberation was to reach a conclusion that everyone could agree with.

At this point we can begin to pull some threads together. In the first section, I mentioned that historical accounts always spoke of sovereigns "bringing together" a kingdom by causing people to "agree" (*manaiky*). The kingdom was pictured as a vast assembly. All of this was simply a way of representing the kingdom in the same terms as a *fokon'olona,* an assembly created on the basis of just such a broad agreement. I also argued that by giving *hasina* to the king, the assembled people created a power which stood, to some degree, outside society, but whose capacity for violence could guarantee moral relations within it.

In this section, we have seen how first ancestors, then, the more abstract powers invoked in *fatidra*, oaths, and *tangena* can play exactly this role. Always there is a certain code of conduct—phrased as a set of prohibitions—and in the latter cases at any rate, always a community of people who agree to that code of conduct, a community which only really comes into being through the act of creating that alien, invisible force.

While "*fokon'olona*" were in essence nothing more than the residents of a certain locality gathering together to come to an agreement about some matter of common concern, the inhabitants of a certain area might formalize these relations. Hence the rituals of sacrifice and raising stones—stones which would often then become the places for carrying out communal ordeals.

At least since Andrianampoinimerina (1789–1810), governments have

tried to turn the *fokon'olona* into an institution of state. The obligation to give *hasina* after every *fokon'olona* decision basically came down to a statement that all agreements were, ultimately, the agreement to have a king (whose power guaranteed it). Similarly, no ordeals were allowed except for the *tangena*, and that could only be administered by royal representatives. This is why it is difficult to find clear references to *fitsitsihina* in nineteenth-century literature; before 1861, applying an ordeal other than *tangena* would have been treasonous; after 1861, all such practices were outlawed. It is very unlikely that they were entirely abandoned; but there are certainly no records of them in official documents. Their importance has to be reconstructed from oral traditions. Oral traditions of the present day, however, are full of stories about oaths, stones, and ordeals—the memory of such rituals still plays a central role in how communities define themselves.

In any ancient village, there was almost certain to be a "stone of imprecations" (*vato fitsitsihina*), where, people would say, ordeals used to be performed in Malagasy times. Sometimes these stones were actually part of ancient tombs, more often, they simply stood in the middle of the *kianja* or some other public place. Often, people would explain that these were places where the elders of long ago had gathered together to make a vow, that any who violated the rules of their community would be called before it for judgment. Usually they would sacrifice a sheep or ox in doing so. Always, enforcing the rules would involve periodic *fitsitsihina,* carried out at that spot. Older men who narrated local history would always launch into paeans to the resulting honesty of the people of old, their truthfulness and respect for one another's property. Often, the narrators were quite explicit about explaining how such stones were dedicated by people of different ancestries, in order to create the means by which they could live together. But almost no one stuck to this way of representing things consistently: mainly because no one wished to imply that such ordeals were still being conducted in the present day. So there was another model. The sacrifice and dedication of the stones could also be seen as rituals which "gave *hasina* to" (*manasina*) the stone, which, thus consecrated, acted of its own accord. Hence, many older men would boast how to this day, in their communities, people can leave their tools and shovels out after a day's work, even leave bales of rice out under their terraces overnight. Why? Because if anyone dared steal them, the invisible power of the stone would drive them out. Somehow, they'd simply leave. All the more quickly if one tried to do something truly insidious such as using witchcraft.

This kind of rhetoric had its problems, too—or anyway people clearly felt it did. Thus even here, narrators would often become vague and slightly uncomfortable. First of all, it soon became clear such stones did not simply push people away, they acted, much like ancestors, to punish offenders, to make them grow sick and die. Secondly, most objects so consecrated also needed to be maintained. Even if one no longer sacrificed sheep, they almost always had taboos, and observing these was itself as way of "giving them hasina." In this they were less like ancestors than like *ody*—objects which always had a slight tinge of immorality, and in so far as they attacked their victims, were witchcraft. As a result people would tend to shift back and forth between the two ways of representing things, not entirely comfortable with either.

In Betafo there were two such stones: one in front of the church, another barely visible under the long grass that now covered the old *kianja* below Andrianambololona's tomb. Miadana told me that no one dared to use this latter stone: the ancestor was so fierce that they feared if their accusation was unjustified he might well destroy them. A neighbor insisted the stone's *hasina* had nothing to do with that of the ancestor. What made it *masinaa* was the fact that people had once performed rituals to consecrate it (*manasina*). It had indeed been very *masina* in the past; however, he really couldn't say whether it was still.

CHARACTER

4

"You should be careful when you go asking people about beads," Chantal told me one day, early on in my researches. For weeks, I had been going to the market and buying beads, drawing colored pictures of each variety in the pocket-sized notebooks I always carried around, and then showing the pictures to anyone I thought might be able to tell me their names and purposes. "Because when you start talking about *fanafody* (medicine)," she said, "the first thing people are going to think is that you're going to bewitch someone."

"But there are good uses for medicine," I insisted, since many others had told me that there were. Chantal, after all, was partly city-bred and a devout Catholic: she had almost become a nun. If anyone was going to be opposed to *fanafody* on principle, it was likely to be her.

"Maybe, yes," she admitted, "but very little. The vast majority are evil."

Even beads? I asked—since I had been under the impression that beads were almost universally benevolent—and she said yes, even beads.

I was dubious. A few days later, when Chantal and I were talking to an old man in a nearby village called Antanibe, I brought up the matter to him. I have been making this collection of beads, I explained (holding out a few) but I'm a little worried what people are likely to think.

Oh, there's no need to worry about that, he told me. Beads are not used to harm anyone; they're all just protection (*fiarovana*)—nothing anyone could conceivably object to. The man was a simple farmer, his manner was modest and unassuming, but Chantal was only twenty-five years old, and on such "Malagasy" topics at least, she could only to yield to the intrinsic authority of a rural elder. "Really?" she said meekly. "I hadn't realized." She never brought the matter up again.

Protection

I started with this story because it makes it clear that there were different frameworks by which one could assess another's character. Chantal was worried that I might develop a bad reputation just by being associated with beads. According to Christian teaching, any such medicines were holdovers from heathen practices, *fanompoana sampy.* They are the very definition of darkness, ignorance, and evil. But she also knew very well that while all of her rural neighbors considered themselves Christians, and were familiar with this sort of rhetoric in sermons or Sunday-school lectures, they did not see them as in any way relevant to immediate practical concerns.

One might almost describe the result as a kind of split hegemony. To a certain degree, there was a "high culture" based in the church, which no one openly mocked, opposed, or contradicted. In plays and novels, *sampy* ("idols"), *ody,* and "heathen" practices were all represented as intrinsically evil. Witches were servants of Satan; they prayed to idols as a way of invoking demons. In my own experience, even those ordinary people who enjoyed such works as literature saw them as existing at a total remove from practical reality. Perhaps they could be imagined to express some ultimate moral truth, but no one thought real witches—ones who might really accost you if you stay out late at night—were anything like that. This was true even of the educated. When it came down to practical matters, or "Malagasy" forms of knowledge, even they deferred.

When it came to practical questions, everyone tended to fall back on what was generally referred to as the "Malagasy" perspective. This could be summarized quite simply. To use *ody* or other invisible means to harm others is witchcraft. Witchcraft in any form is absolutely wrong. It is wrong even if it is unintentional. But here is the problem. As Richard Andriamanjato points out (1957) Malagasy moral reasoning tends to set out from the assumption that, since one can never really be able to know the full ramifications of any action one might undertake, one must always act in the knowledge that one's actions are almost certain to have some negative repercussions on others. Since the power of *ody* is so much greater than that of ordinary human action, this means that anyone employing such powers is in a special moral jeopardy: not only are they almost certain to harm others, they are almost certain to do so in very serious ways. It follows that the only way of using medicine that is entirely above suspicion is to use it to *prevent*

others from carrying out even more harmful actions. This is what the elder was referring to when he talked about "protection." Protection medicine intervened to prevent harm: whether it closed the jaws of crocodiles, forced enemies' bullets to misfire, blunted the power of malicious witchcraft, or deflected hail from crops.

Thus, ethic of protection obviously paralleled the ethic of negative authority, the authority of elders themselves—which also held that the most legitimate way to act was to prevent others from acting in ways likely to damage others. Actually, one might well say both were exactly the same thing. Political authority was similar to medicine in that it enhanced one's power; for that very reason, elders and those using medicines both had to take even more precautions than usual not to do anything for which others might justifiably blame them.

Actually, talk about medicine, speculation about who might have access to what sort of invisible power and what they might be inclined to do with that power, was one of the more common ways to discuss questions of personal morality. This made the weakness of Christian discourse all the more surprising. Once, when poking around bookstands in the capital, I happened on a Malagasy-language pamphlet about love medicine. On the cover, it promised to reveal all the secrets about a very famous kind of *ody* called *Fanainga Lavitra,* "summoning from afar," often used to retrieve absconded lovers. I bought it and tried to read it when I got home, but after the first few pages put it aside: the author seemed more interested in showing off his knowledge of Egyptian and Babylonian numerology than discussing the ingredients of *ody*. A few days later one of Chantal's many sisters shyly asked me if she could take a glance at it—shyly, because love medicine was considered morally dubious, though she did have a fairly legitimate cause: she had a two-year-old son whose father had recently run off to another city. The next day she returned the book with an expression of utter disgust. "It tells you to make prayers to Satan!" she said. Everyone in the room expressed shock and outrage (they all considered themselves devout Catholics). "That's not Malagasy!" several said. The consensus was that this was obviously some urban intellectual's nasty little fantasy about what magic should be like; the very fact he brought Satan into it was enough to show the man had no idea what he was talking about.

Hence Chantal's deferential attitude, her willingness to accept that rural elders would really know about such "Malagasy" forms of know-how.

Chunks of Wood as Tokens of Character

All this is not to say that church attitudes did not have their effects. While no one, even the most pious, was willing to see all forms of medicine as Satanic, the association with heathenism, with "serving the idols," was enough to ensure that all were at least seen as morally problematic. This was true despite the fact that medicine was ubiquitous: anyone who went to a traditional curer, for example, had to do with the stuff in some capacity, and almost all significant figures in a community were assumed to at the very least have access to some powerful "Malagasy" knowledge. But at the same time, just about anyone could, if they saw fit, adopt an air of pious disdain or self-righteous condemnation of them for that very reason. It all contributed to a moral universe where rumors, stories, and judgments about medicine became one of the principle means of speculating about the troubles in society, as well as one of the main ways of assessing any man or woman's character.

Most of what I have said about nineteenth-century *ody* was still true when I was there. *Ody* were still collections of powerful substances—mainly consisting of "chunks of wood" (*tapa-kazo*) but occasionally including other elements—that were typically preserved in a sack, ox-horn, or bottle. The wood, or roots, or leaves, or other substances could be taken like medicine: the leaves crushed, the wood scraped to produce a powder that one could drink or anoint on the body mixed with honey, rum, or water; but most *ody* were also seen as having the power to act invisibly, at a distance. As before, this power was seen to derive from the conscious agency of an invisible spirit,[1] the individual elements being merely conduits.

The question was how to justify all this. Some spoke of medicine as if it were a simple matter of technical knowledge, a Malagasy *fahaizana,* or "know-how," which one learns through study much like the foreign know-how that one learns in schools and colleges. Others took a moralistic position that set itself squarely against this: elders would often, for instance, tell me how they knew astrology or had the power to cure certain ailments, but make a great point that this was not something they had learned from study, but rather had come to them spontaneously, a gift of God, the ancestors, or both. Many Christians stressed the difference between medicine that bore some resemblance to the Western variety (also called *fanafody*), and medicine that obviously did not. For example, even a devout Protestant pastor would not see anything wrong with a traditional herbal infusion; but he would likely think

there was something deeply wrong with manipulating beads. In addition, since *sampy* were always spoken of as "chunks of wood," urban Christians would often make a great distinction between the use of wood and roots as medicine—which they treated as self-evidently immoral—and the use of concoctions made of leaves. I rather doubt if anyone, in the countryside, observed such distinctions systematically, but almost anyone was capable of invoking them in order to condemn someone they didn't like.

Finally, elders who had received their abilities directly from God or the ancestors always also insisted that they never charged money for using them; there was a feeling that the effects of grace should not be tainted by considerations of profit. Now, these people were very much a minority among curers and practitioners. The overwhelming majority of the latter were professionals, falling into two broad types: *mpanandro,* astrologers, expert in the Malagasy lunar calendar, and *Zanadrano*, or mediums, who communed with the spirits of ancient kings. Such people were referred to collectively as *mpomasy,* and all of them cured illness, particularly those caused by witchcraft, and provided their patients with medicine, either as part of the cure or for help or protection. All of them charged money for their services. Medicine was an extremely commercialized business, and in this it was not much different than most other aspects of Merina society: this was, after all, a place where even in small villages where practically everyone is related one may find a little booth on the path leading to the rice fields where someone's selling coffee. People are always buying and selling things. But what was significant about medicine is that almost all practitioners felt at least a little bit uneasy about this fact, and, while most did, in fact, charge fixed prices, almost everyone I talked to agreed that in principle, they shouldn't. A proper *mpomasy* should leave it up to the patient to decide how much they felt the cure was worth.

This sort of rhetoric was especially useful if one wished to cast doubt on the political standing of elders—since elders were in principle individuals of sterling character, very icons of morality, and it was therefore rather unseemly for them to be seen to be "playing around" with medicine. Betafo's *andriana* were especially prone to invoke this sort of rhetoric against the local *mainty*, condemning them for their use of beads and chunks of wood. Once when I was visiting Armand I heard his mother do the same—after telling the story of an *andriana* man who had been visited in his dreams by the soul of a lost Sakalava traveler who had died and been buried in the side of a nearby hill,

and ended up building a shrine to it—launched into a prolonged and largely whimsical denunciation: "So doesn't it say in the Bible not to worship any gods but me?"

"So you're saying one should go straight to God," objected Nety, "and not do anything to give yourself life, or protect yourself? Witchcraft is wrong. But if you're not using it to hurt others, then what's the problem?"

Razafindravao would have none of it. "Is worshipping some dead body any better than worshipping a piece of wood? Or . . ." At least she managed to keep it up for a minute or two before finally starting to giggle, whereon everyone in the room also burst out laughing.

Moral Persons

In doing fieldwork, as in ordinary life, one is constantly hearing people describing one another to you, trying to give you a sense, for instance, about what you really ought to know about some man or woman that you have not met. In Madagascar, I found, such descriptions rarely dwelt on exterior features like physical appearance, dress, or manner. When asked to provide a description of someone they had, say, met briefly in the marketplace, most people would usually just note age and gender, then try to provide what scraps they could about the stranger's origins, occupation, skills, or about any position they might hold (a pastor, a schoolteacher). Almost never would they have anything to say about what they looked liked. Even adolescent boys talking about girls, or vice versa, would rarely go beyond a summary of size, complexion, and general attractiveness—even here, descriptions would turn quickly to remarks about the other person's possible capacities, dispositions, knowledge, and intentions. The really important qualities of a person were always assumed to be those invisible to the eye. As one famous proverb puts it, *ny fanahy no olona,* "Character defines the person."

There was a whole vocabulary with which to assess another's character. Probably the most common way to express approval of someone, for example, was to call them *tsara* ("good"), or *tsara fanahy* ("of good character"), roughly equivalent to the English "good natured" or "nice guy." To call someone this was to say that they were gentle, kind, benevolently inclined toward others, not easily moved to anger. The opposite is *ratsy fanahy,* "bad tempered," a nasty person, which grades into *masiaka,* "fierce," "savage," or "cruel."

There are a lot of other ways to approve and disapprove of another's character. One important term is *hendry,* "sensible,"[2] which takes on its meaning mainly as the opposite of two of the most common words used to cast aspersions: *adala,* "insane, idiotic, senseless," and *maditra,* "naughty, rebellious, badly behaved." A sensible person, then, is one able to conform to social conventions; those who are *adala* are not capable of doing so; those who are *maditra* do not care to. I never heard anyone spontaneously describe another person as *hendry,* but *adala* was probably the most common way of completely dismissing someone (it also covered a lot of the same ground as the English "stupid"). As for *maditra,* it was used incessently whenever children were around, and, in a more broad, descriptive sense, to any one who intentionally violated rules or moral conventions.

Actually, there was a rich and often used vocabulary for implying that others were not in their right senses, matched only, perhaps, by the endless ways of describing them as annoying.[3] At the time I was in Madagascar I developed the somewhat whimsical theory that this richness stems at least in part from a strong disapproval of public confrontation—so that everyday, ordinary people were obliged to stoically endure behavior that got on their nerves, and then went home and complained about it. The nonconfrontational ethos, anyway, was real enough. If I so much as began to protest when a storekeeper tried to cheat me, my companions would almost instantly start trying to shuffle me away, telling me *aza mitabataba,* "don't make a scene" (literally, "don't make a racket")—just let it go and don't come back to this store in the future. By the end I became so accustomed to Malagasy standards that during my first month in America I was completely disconcerted and confused whenever I saw two people openly arguing in public. Similarly, calling people violent, swaggering, overly assertive (*setrasetra*) was strong condemnation; there was very little sense of respect or approval for such behavior, or anything remotely resembling an ethos of machismo, a feeling one has to put up a front of potential physical violence in order to retain honor or respect. Instead, such behavior was itself mostly likely to be considered shameful.

Probably the most common term of approval was *tsotra,* which literally means "simple." This is a term with none of the negative associations it would have in English—I never heard it used in anything but a positive way. *Tsotra* is the opposite of both *fetsy* and *miavona.* The first means "crafty," "devious," or "deceitful"; the latter, "arrogant" or "pretentious." To be simple, then, means to be open, direct, and unassuming.

Unlike most of the negative terms I'm discussing here, *fetsy* is not exclusively a term of condemnation. One can used it admiringly of someone who comes up with a particularly good ploy in bargaining, or a clever stratagem of any kind. There is a definite ambivalence here. Moral rhetoric may dwell incessantly on the value of honesty, transparency, and *fahamarinana,* "truth;" there may be innumerable proverbs against lying,[4] but in ordinary life, people seemed to proceed on the assumption that all human relations necessary involve an element of deception; it is foolish to admit everything one is about; there will always be false fronts, hidden motives, stratagems. People were always laughingly accusing each other of lying, happily responding to any opinion with which they happen to disagree, or any account they wouldn't have told precisely the same way, with *lainga izany,* "that's a lie!" When even an embellishment of narration becomes a lie, lies in themselves can not be all that morally objectionable, and indeed the general opinion seemed to be that lies were only evil if done with evil ends in mind.

One might go even further: an ethos of avoiding confrontation necessarily meant that at least in certain circumstances, tact and diplomacy—in other words, benevolent lying—was a virtue. Elinor Ochs (1974) emphasizes this in her discussion of formal rhetoric, in which speakers are admired especially for their ability at making their points indirectly, avoiding transparent speech which might cause someone affront.

Still, *tsotra* was purely a term of praise, and a very common one. A person to whom it would not even occur to think in terms of such subtle stratagems was valued—considered especially admirable, perhaps, in so far as the way they were acting was obviously impractical. Nety's response to her mother-in-law's facetious diatribe about the heathen *andriana* was a perfect example of how a "simple" person would behave: it's not that she was not perceptive enough to realize that her mother-in-law was being facetious, she just didn't like to play such games herself, so she responded to everyone as if they were being perfectly serious.

Anyone who makes a point of emphasizing their superiority over others can be called *miavona* ("arrogant," "stuck up"). In principle, the term is not applied simply to those who are wealthier, more talented or influential, but those who flaunt it or intentionally try to place themselves above others. In practice, the line can become rather blurred. *Olona tsotra,* "simple people" is as I've remarked the word used for "the common people," ordinary folk as opposed to the elite; implying the latter are all at least a little *miavona* in comparison.

In rural communities, *miavona* especially applied to anyone who flaunted their wealth: those who went around in city clothes, for instance, wearing shoes, carrying parasols or other accouterments most of their neighbors would never be able to afford. Miadana and her family claimed that this was particularly a problem in Betafo: after unintentionally offending their neighbors on several occasions, they finally got to the point where they even avoided wearing clothes that seemed unusually white and clean. But it was not as if anyone ever expressed this openly, as an ideal: "We are all one community, therefore we should all be the same." Perhaps the notion could be said to lie embedded in the way everyone talked of commonality: in rhetoric, where everything was one ancestry, one ancestral land, one community. Perhaps too the ethos of love and sharing, of identification with one's fellows and their needs, could be said to lead in this direction—though as I've already pointed out, it was not usually taken this far. But in practice, the reason you did not dare to wear clean clothes—to be seen as arrogant—was for fear of envy. Others would see your greater wealth or happiness and resent you, and probably use sorcery against you and you would end up sick. In so far as people openly discussed it, the desire for equality, in fact, it was almost never as a positive ideal, but as a terrible moral evil.

I heard a great deal about envy. Of all the hidden motives and emotions assumed to lie behind ordinary interaction, envy was considered the most dangerous and destructive. When one asked what drove people to bewitch each other, the reply was always automatic: it was because of *fialonana,* of envy. By this they did not so much mean envy in the sense of covetousness, the desire to acquire some good or advantage because one's neighbor had it, but in the purely destructive sense of wanting to deprive them of it, or harm them in some other way out of resentment. *Fialonana,* "envy," was considered continuous with *ankasomparana,* "spite," "resentment"; the latter was a synonymn for sorcery. To *manao ankasomparana,* "perform an act of spite" was to injure someone through the use of medicine. All of this was considered the very definition of evil.

Sex, Envy, and Community

In the introduction I alluded to a certain notion of Malagasy solidarity, a sense that all Malagasy were equal at least in their common opposition to some overarching force of arbitrary violence. Again, the ideal had little positive

expression, apart perhaps from common oratorical figures like *Malagasy tsy vaky volo,* "the Malagasy people: a single untressed head of hair"—a uniform mass of identical elements undivided by any further subdivisions, a nice image of perfect equality. When generalizing to foreigners such as myself, some would speak of a Malagasy national character defined by mutual love and love of the land, even a certain lack of competitiveness (at least in comparison to us *Vazaha*); but even more powerful was the tendency to define Malagasy character by its typical vices, of which the primary one was envy. If one person strives to advance themselves, I was often told, everyone else will try to pull them down. This was the reason for malevolent sorcery, and malevolent sorcery itself was considered a particularly Malagasy phenomena: just as *tongolo* meant "onions," and *tongolo gasy,* "Malagasy onions," was the word for garlic; *ody* were charms or remedies, but *ody gasy,* "Malagasy *ody*" were those specifically used to do harm.

This view of Malagasy character was one I heard most consistently from curers, who were, of course, the great experts on malicious sorcery. Should someone fall sick, it was an astrologer or medium who would reveal who had intended to harm them and the means they had used. Curers would always insist their spirits would not permit them to take vengeance or otherwise harm those responsible for the sorcery, but they would reveal their identities, hence, any community was endlessly creased by suspicions of hidden envy and malice. It was considered notorious that more often than not it was close kin or other intimate acquaintances who were most likely to be named as the culprits—though these suspicions were always somewhat diffuse and tentative, since everyone also knew curers often turned out to be wrong.

Betafo, according to many of its inhabitants, was notorious both for its envy and its sorcery. In fact, I suspect this was a constant; the feeling that a community was crisscrossed by continual covert aggression was the inevitable underside of the ideal of equality, transparency, and solidarity touted by its elders. And just as all personal interaction was assumed to be marked by a certain degree of hidden motives, the reality of envy ensured that communities were full of subtle rivalries and conflicts, endless manipulations and strategies. Most dramatically, envy was thought to inspire continual sexual intrigue.

Here I should point out that Madagascar is a society when sexual relations are, from the age when one becomes physically capable, considered an entirely normal and expected part of life. Strict marital fidelity, by either men

or women, is seen more as a touching sign of devotion than anything one could normally expect. Some would emphasize of the positive aspects of sexuality, as a means of bringing different sorts of people together; at least in Betafo, I was also told there was a direct connection between sex and envy. If you are envious of another person, the natural response is to try to seduce that person's wife or husband. Quite often, in relations of mutual rivalry, two men would each be having the affair with the wife of the other, or two women with each other's husbands.

I first got wind of all this one day when talking to Madame Mariel, Betafo's schoolteacher, and her husband. The exchange began when I didn't understand an expression she used—*maro vady,* which literally means "many spouses"—I didn't realize that *vady* can be used more loosely to refer to any sexual partner, and thought she meant that they frequently remarry.

> Mariel: And they're all *maro vady*! Whether male or female—there's some with four, even five.
> David: You mean they separate a lot, or die a lot, or what?
> Mariel: No, I mean they're all envious of each other so they all steal each other's wives and husbands. Did you notice how below Betafo—the reason for there being all those creatures appearing in the water at the present time? It's because everyone's bewitching everybody else (because of all this stealing spouses). They're all stealing each others' spouses so they do medicine, they do medicine, and in the end, after all this medicine has piled up there, it starts to, like, turn into creatures.
>
> It's the children here who discovered it: "There are lots of creatures twisted around each other, coming out the mouth of the spring to the east of town." Just before Christmas they were telling me about this in school: how they're afraid to go down there because they're all dangling off the pipe the water comes out of. When they poke around down there at five in the evening, there are huge numbers of them all coiled together there.
> Her husband: [laughing] So they run away!
> David: These are like snakes, then?
> Her husband: Like snakes, but all coiled up. Like lots of them all twisted together.

The logic was this: people are envious of one another. Therefore they try to seduce each other's wives or husbands. Therefore they resort to medicine: love medicine to win over their target's affections, or sorcery, in revenge for sexual rejection, or to frighten a victim into compliance. The easiest way to get an *ody* or other bits of medicine into someone else's house is to place it where they get their drinking water, so people in Betafo were endlessly sneaking down to

the springs surrounding the village, hiding medicine. So much evil medicine finally built up in some of these places that the stuff started to coalesce and turn into monsters, so when the children arrived with their plastic buckets to gather water in the evening, they would be terrified and run away.

Later I brought Mariel's story up to Nivo, Miadana's teenage daughter. She hadn't heard about the monsters (she had been spending most of the last few weeks in Arivonimamo, attending the lycée) but she strongly affirmed the connection of envy and sexual intrigue:

> Nivo: Stealing wives and husbands, that's what really rules here. In Betafo. Belanitra, it's just some of them that do it, but where we live, everybody does. And of course it's got to lead to quarrels; everybody's fighting because people hear about it and they get angry.
> David: Armand tells me that's one of the reasons he doesn't really live in Betafo; if his wife isn't willing, people are likely to bewitch her.
> Nivo: The way it usually works, you know: each one steals the other's. That is to say, one man's wife is the other man's lover, each takes the wife of the other. Almost always it's like that. Like in our case, it was Norbert wanted to take Mom . . .
> David: I've heard that when it gets like that, people will be afraid to eat in one another's houses.
> Nivo: We don't eat in anybody's house, absolutely. If it's around Betafo, we just won't eat there at all. "This guy steals wives . . ."—I've actually seen this in Betafo, somebody starts feeling weak all the time, and it's "this person does love medicine, that person does love medicine, this person does black love medicine, that person does this, this person does that . . ."
> David: Black love medicine?
> Nivo: That's if you're fighting with *ody fitia.* It can happen that—say you do *ody fitia,* and you have a rival. You get the girl. But there are some people who can make a person detest someone else [lit: "not love them blackly"]. One makes her love you. The other makes her hate your rival. Medicine is a really heavy thing; it really rules there.

The image of envy coalescing in the springs and turning into snakelike monsters is an unusually striking one; I never found anyone else who'd confirm it. But Nivo's concerns were universal. The constant assumption of hidden intentions lead both to a constant level of suspicion, and an infinitely complex politics of suggestion: every unusual gesture could be read as an indication of malice or desire; the assumption that certain people had the means to directly intervene in other's wills or desires could lead to endless calculations. To take a random example, if a man or woman was widely reputed to know love medicine, one could hardly be held fully responsible for an adulterous liaison even if one had oneself initiated it.

There is a longstanding literature on the relation of egalitarianism and envy, by anthropologists as well as political and philosophical thinkers (for instance, Shoeck 1968, Foster 1972, Ben-Ze'ev 1992, 1993, etc.). In it, it is often remarked that one is much more likely to be envious of equals, or near equals, than people who are vastly more rich or powerful. Envy demands a certain parity, or at least, the ability to imagine oneself in that other person's shoes.[5] In this sense, envy becomes a kind of destructive empathy: one has to be able to imagine oneself enjoying another person's situation in order to experience anger and hostility at the realization that one is not, in fact, enjoying it.

What this implies is first of all that envy is the inevitable concomitant of any fairly egalitarian community; secondly, that it arises from a perverse dislocation of the very feelings of sympathy and identification that people like Jean Marie claimed was the basis of community itself. If love was a matter of identifying with others, feeling their happinesses and sadnesses as your own,[6] identifying with their needs, and so forth, then envy was when that ability to identify perversely snapped back into hatred and the resentful desire to destroy. Of course, when two envious people steal each other's spouses, one can imagine the real meaning is related to the problem of love, sharing, and property already outlined above: a failure of the love one should have for one's kin and neighbors, expressed in a failure to share property, leads to a revenge which takes the form of imposing a community of love and sharing on a different level—one which would have a more immediately emotionally distressing impact.

The problem with much that has been written on the subject of envy—particularly, with attempts to prove the desire for equality itself is rooted in envy—is that they treat envy as a motivation which arises entirely of its own accord, completely detaching it from the motives of those who become its objects. Foster, for example, argues that envy is a universal feature of social life by taking as his prime example the envy of a poor, undernourished peasant family for their neighbors who have abundant supplies of food (1972:169). Now, aside from the point that "envy" is probably not the best description of the emotion such a situation is likely to inspire,[7] this is an example which leaves the motivations of the wealthy neighbors entirely unproblematic: obviously, anyone would want to make sure their family had enough to eat. Similarly, many discussions of envy take, as their initial examples, envy of another person's beauty, talent, or luck—qualities that other person never made any effort to acquire, or even chose to have at all. But if the aim is use the concept of envy to describe attitudes toward wealth and property, this is not the most

revealing place to start. It would be much better to begin, as people in Betafo seemed to do, with such phenomena as the display of wealth and sexual rivalry. Why does a man wish to be seen in flashy clothes, or with a beautiful woman hanging on his arm? It is hard to deny that such people desire to be envied. In other words, much of what drives people to accumulate wealth to begin with is a desire to arouse feelings of envy in others, to encourage others to imagine how nice it would be to be in their position, and then to have to live with the fact that they cannot. Thus envy was not simply a product of egalitarianism—as some would like to claim. It is a driving force behind the desire to accumulate and to establish hierarchies that threatened to break egalitarian communities apart.

A place like Betafo, then, was caught up in a constant, shifting play of identifications in which people were constantly imagining themselves in other people's shoes, but in which sympathy could easily reverse and become destructive envy. In this way, at least, envy really was the underside of communal solidarity, and witchcraft an inevitable perversion of communal love.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BETAFO

5

Imerina, remember, is divided into ancestral territories, each belonging to the descendants of a single named ancestor who is, usually, said to have migrated there sometime in "Malagasy times." Roughly a third of such demes claim *andriana,* or "noble" status, the rest are *hova,* or "commoners."

There was usually a little story about that founding ancestor: where he came from, why he left, how he moved to the territory on which his descendants now reside, how he defined its boundaries, created its villages, named various prominent aspects of its landscape. Often there was a story about how he divided up the territory among his children, the senior lines always being located furthest to the east. Only a few old men (or very occasionally women) would feel entitled to tell such official histories, though most could give a sketchy account of more recent history, of the prominent elders (almost always, said to be just recently deceased) who had gone on to found later settlements.

For most people, this is what local "history" (*tantara*) largely consisted of; certainly, if you asked about local history, this is what they would think you were asking about. But there were other strains of history, which came out in other contexts: ranging from accounts of ancient royalty to covert, shameful rumors about how masters had once treated slaves—stories about relations of dominance and oppression, injustice, punishment, and guilt. In this chapter, I want to examine both of these ways of looking at history. I also want to provide a thumbnail sketch of Betafo's history, comparing the official "history" with what can be reconstructed from written records. Even for this relatively obscure part of Imerina, documentary records are surprisingly rich: it is possible, for instance, to patch together a good deal of the history of Betafo's three most prominent nineteenth-century families.

Two Sides of the Mountain

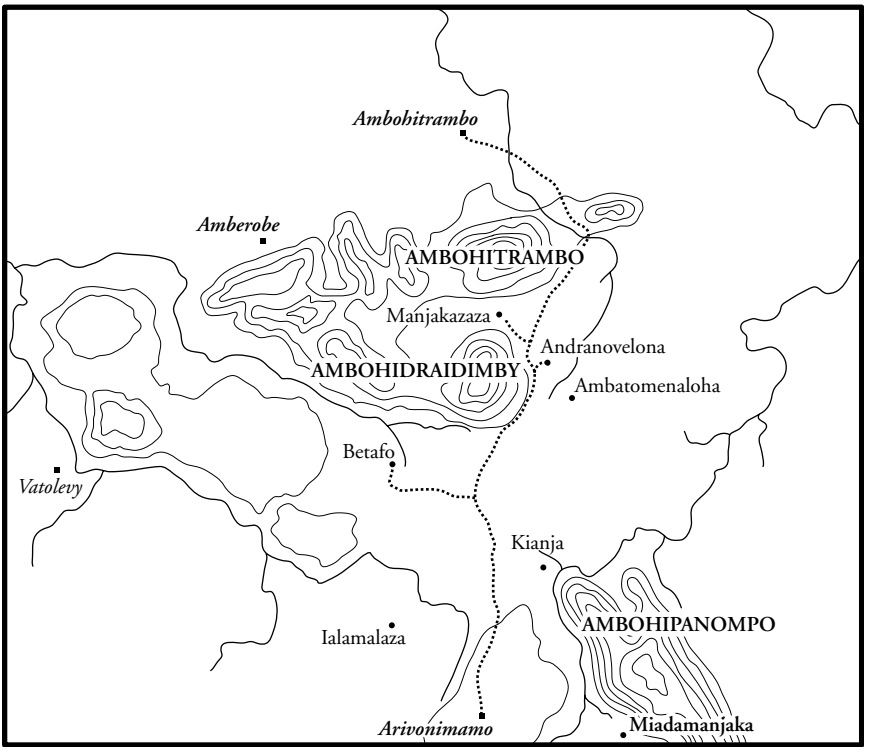
Heading north from Arivonimamo is a fairly wide road—or, I call it a road mainly because that's what people there call it, and because it was once partly paved with stones. By now the one stretch which still shows traces of paving is the most difficult to walk on, since the remains of paving stones stick out of the clay at unpredictable angles. But it's only really like that just to the north of town. After a bit the stones disappear and the road becomes a simple expanse of hard red earth, wide enough for three or even four people to walk abreast, though also cut by deep ruts of ox-carts which would make this impossible.

The road runs along low hillsides, fringed with high grass, often descending on one side to stretches of tapia forest or stands of eucalyptus. One periodically passes people walking, in the summer, ox-carts filled with pineapples (since that's the main cash crop of the area) roll toward Arivonimamo; on Sundays and Mondays young men pass by driving troops of cattle towards the great weekly cattle market outside the capital. Only very exceptionally would anyone take an automobile along this road.

About half an hour's walk from Arivonimamo a side path veers off west to Betafo, another, east to a place called Kianja. The crossroads, such as it is, is on a slight hill, and marked by a tiny thatched coffee-stand, which seems to pop out of nowhere. Here a woman from Kianja sells greasy rice cakes and sweets and exchanges gossip with passersby. I used to stop here almost every day, sit down, and drink a cup of coffee before passing on to Betafo.

From the grassy spot in front of the coffee stand, Mount Ambohidraidimby looms smooth and granitic, a huge round rock about ten minutes walk to the north. It's a dramatic sight, especially in the summer when dozens of tiny springs within the rock come to life and thin sheets of water coat most of its sides, so that when caught at the right angle by the sun, the whole mountain seems to glisten.

Actually, this peak is only the easternmost of a chain of peaks, collectively named Ambohidraidimby. The territory of Betafo lies below them, to their south. If one continues north, however, to the mountain, the road curves to hug the rock, at some spots digging itself so deep into the red mud of the hillsides that one is often walking through something like a hallway, between walls of roots and crumbling earth. At other spots the granite cliffs of the mountain bulge out above. Erosion plays weird effects; there are cracks and fissures and even sudden inexplicable holes opening in the ground. Pedestrians



1. Ambohitrambo Region, c. 1990

become fewer. For most of the way, it's almost impossible to make out much of the surrounding countryside: at least in the summer, one knows one is approaching a place of human habitation by hearing it: the rhythmic drip of water indicating nearby paddy fields.

The northern side of the mountain is less sheer and there are foothills and crags; paths branch off the road, heading up through bushy forest. One leads to Andranovelona, a village sheltered by the woods. Just a short ways to the north, one breaks out of the woods entirely and finds oneself looking out over a stretch of open country, dotted with settlements and terraced valleys; behind it, directly to the north, is the imposing sugar-loaf mountain of Ambohitrambo. It is Ambohitrambo that really dominates the district—it can be seen for miles all around—and which is said to have been the seat of its ancient kings.

Andranovelona is the most ancient village of a deme which calls itself the Zanak'Andriandranomarina, and holds the tomb of its *razambe.* Directly

between the two mountains is an even larger village called Manjakazaza ("a child rules"), the most ancient village of the twin deme called the Zanak'-Andriamalahasima. Both demes are *hova,* "commoners," but known for their industrious habits and prosperity. According to some, the two ancestors were brothers; according to others, unrelated friends. At any rate, the two ancestries see themselves as closely related.

There is a story about how Manjakazaza got its name. It's a story just about anyone in the region north of Arivonimamo could tell you; I recorded at least twenty different versions of it during the time I was there, no two quite the same. But the core of it runs something like this:

There was a king who ruled this entire region from the peak of Ambohitrambo, who had a son named Lailoza. Lailoza was extremely arrogant and badly behaved. He used to order his father's subjects around arbitrarily. There are stories about how he would whimsically make his servants[1] take his cattle up and down the mountain, and especially, how he made the women of the country work endlessly making silk and weaving it into gigantic silk cables. With these cables, he intended to build a bridge between the two peaks. According to some, he would not deign to walk on the hillsides, but only on the tops of mountains. But all describe the bridge, a kind of elaborate tightrope with two cables below for his feet, one on top for his hands; and how his father finally took pity on the people's suffering, and cut the cord while the son was halfway across it, so that he tumbled to his death. The place where he landed they say is now called Manjakazaza, "a child rules," "because he was just a child, but he lorded it over everyone" (*zaza fotsiny fa nanjakajaka*).

Such was the end of the kings of Ambohitrambo. At least, this is what many narrators add, and this is what makes the story so poignant: in order to save his people, the king sacrificed his own posterity—even, as it turned out, the institution of kingship itself. One could say the story parallels Andriantsihanika's, who sacrificed his *andriana* status because he didn't want to treat others as slaves. And indeed, like Andriantsihanika, Lailoza has become a curing spirit; he has his own *doany:* an ancient tomb atop an ancient tower on the very summit of Ambohitrambo, where people come regularly to *manasina* and invoke him. However, Andriantsihanika has descendants; in fact in some versions, he abandoned his status in order to win land for them, sacrificing power for the sake of posterity. Lailoza's story is more tragic, because his father was forced to give up both.

Since Lailoza is the only ancient king most local people know anything about, it can be said that the main thing the kings of Imamo are remembered for is self-destruction.

One of the first times I heard this story it was from a man from Andranovelona named Ranaivoson—a very short, energetic, mustachioed man who claimed to be seventy years old, a skilled astrologer who carried bits of wood and an ancient silver coin in his pocket, folded inside a white silk handkerchief—and who everyone recommended as the great expert in local history.

Ranaivoson had his own theory about most everything. In his version, it wasn't silk they made the bridges from, but human hair—Lailoza had all the women's tresses sheared and then had them weave it into cables. The ancestors of the twin demes, he told me, were not really related to each other. In fact, they were only ancestors in a manner of speaking. They had originally been officials sent out by the royal government to administer the local population.

I never found anyone else who agreed with him on this point, but what I want to draw attention to here is the peculiar, dual nature of his moral rhetoric. Taking us above the village to a large old tree, he pointed out a flat rock near its foot. Under that, he said, was Andriandranomarina's tomb. The stone was sometimes used for carrying out ordeals: one need merely rub it, make one's oath, and within three days justice would be done. It was because of the moral character of the man buried there: he was a man who "held on to the truth" (*mitana fahamarinana*); if anyone in the village was crooked or cruel, his power would afflict them or drive them away. This is exactly the sort of rhetoric familiar from chapter 3. But having said it, he immediately went off in a completely opposite direction. The chief of 500 was not buried in a proper tomb; he simply dug a great pit and threw in all his wealth, creating a huge bed of silver coins. That's why no one has ever performed a *famadihana* for him. He knew that if the grave were opened, they could take away his money. So he made a rule:

> Ranaivoson: "If anyone holds a *famadihana* for me," he said, "if they kill chickens—it has to be a hundred chickens. If they kill cows—it has to be a hundred cows. If they kill pigs—it has to be a hundred pigs." So his descendants haven't been able to do it. He was taking precautions, because you know if they did have a *famadihana,* then they would be able to take away the money. So until this day he just sits there, he's never had a *famadihana.*

The desire for money would be the main reason for anyone to want to hold such a *famadihana,* if Ranaivoson' account is to be believed, because in fact, Andriandranomarina no longer has any real descendants.

> Ranaivoson: He no longer has any descendants. His real descendants—grandchildren, great-grandchildren, posterity, whatever—are all gone. It's the descendants of those he governed who remain. And it's the same with those kings on top of Mount Ambohitrambo—you can't find any real descendants any more; if there are any left at all, it's just a few.
>
> You see in former times, they had the custom of doing things that were against the law. Because their way: say for example they had bought some person: they would chop off his heels. Because of that they had guilt (*tsiny*) before the word of God, and when that guilt was revealed, their descendants didn't flourish. Because of his bad habits, the king's descendants have become scarce.
>
> He had people's heads cut off. He . . . if someone was found guilty before him, they wouldn't say anything, they wouldn't do anything, they'd just go right off and cut off his head, or cut off his heels, or all sorts of things like that. So they were guilty according to the word of God, and in the present, they have very few descendants.
>
> If you really examine the matter, it's the same with the descendants of the kings in the Rova [the palace in Antananarivo]. Very few remain. Because they had customs that were against the law, against the word of God, so the majority of them ended up damaged by it.

Ranaivoson's Andriandranomarina is a weird amalgam of ancestor and oppressor, but the moral vision, at least, is perfectly consistent. Powers of command—here, as always, represented simultaneously as royal power and the power of masters over slaves—are, at least in the grandest scheme of things, essentially illegitimate, even criminal. Particularly, they are the negation of descent. Andriandranomarina's concern to keep his money made it impossible to have any proper relations with his descendants, the *andriana*'s power made them have no successors at all. In the end, Lailoza's fate was that of all *andriana*. Such power annihilates the families of those who practice it. Their lines died out. They're gone. If they still have a presence in the territory, it is only through traces—their names, stones, trees, stories, a presence seen as fundamentally alien by the people who live there, the descendants of those they once governed and oppressed.

All of this is very much in contrast with Betafo.

Lailoza's story has little place in the historical consciousness of Betafo. People know it, certainly—it's a famous story—but few see it as having any real relevance to their own community. This is at least partly because Mount Ambohitrambo is not visible from anywhere in Betafo: it lies hidden behind

Ambohidraidimby, whose successive low peaks form the northern backdrop of the deme. Generally, stories cluster around the main visual landmarks of an area, and a territory is assumed to have belonged to whatever king resided on the nearby mountaintop most visible from within it. Betafo is thus somewhat sheltered, as neither of the two major nearby royal mountains (Ambohitrambo and Ambohipanompo just west of Arivonimamo) are visible from it.[2] But even more important is the fact that the inhabitants of Betafo are *andriana*, and therefore, they do not think of themselves as having been anyone's subjects. In so far as they see a connection, they identify with the kings.[3]

Even more importantly, Betafo is not exclusively *andriana*. It is divided between *andriana* and their former slaves. People from other *andriana* demes in the region (for instance the Andriandranando of Amberobe, to the northwest of the mountains) told me they considered *andriana* status mainly a thing of the past. "After all, everyone marries everyone else nowadays, so no one is pure *andriana* or pure *hova* . . ." But in Amberobe there was no longer a population of black people nearby. In Betafo, the *andriana*'s sense of who they were, of what it meant to be noble, was almost obsessively defined in relation to the issue of slavery.

Compare then the very different conversation I had with Irina's mother Ramanana, the elderly matriarch of Antanety's *andriana*. Here is her summary of the history of Betafo—a history she only produced after much assurance from Miadana that this was for the sake of a foreign student writing a book, and not to be openly discussed by her neighbors. In Betafo, said Ramanana, the white people had been defeated. They had owned slaves, and mistreated them, and once the former slaves managed to get their own land and resources, they rapidly began getting the better of them:

> Ramanana: In the earliest times, there was a market in slaves. There were two men who were slave-dealers, and they would have the slaves carry baskets of manure on their heads, absolutely, saying, "Mine is strong! Mine is strong!"
>
> And people here in Betafo would buy them.
>
> Now many of these servants were trustworthy, and they really worked hard for our ancestors. So the hearts of those elders rolled open, and they said, "here is land for you to own,"—land near where they were living—"here's some land because you are a good and faithful servant" (as it says in holy scripture).
>
> And then our numbers began to grow fewer, until in the present time—now, I won't cut my statement off, I'll really make it perfectly clear—the white people have been defeated. They had money, they had more than they needed, so they all got slack. And what the ancestors had given them, they let it drain away. There. There's what really happened.

> Miadana: Well, that's clear enough. There were servants. So the idea is that at the very beginning, they didn't have anything. However, those that benefited their masters were given land. So their circumstances improved.
>
> And once they had money of their own, they could start buying out the *andriana*—because the *andriana* didn't have the energy to carry them to work. So the *andriana* were defeated. They began selling their rice fields, selling their rice nurseries, selling every kind of land to the people who had once been their servants.
>
> That's why people say the *andriana* have been defeated. They've become feeble; they don't have the strength it takes to work at all. Those bellies, however, need to eat. So they're obliged to sell, and the slaves' property increases. And when their property has increased, so does the number of their descendants, so now it's they who end up bossing people around. While of those who were once the slave-owners—only a few remain.
>
> Ramanana: What really did it, perhaps: they made them work too hard. That's why the owners were so quickly defeated. That's my understanding of the matter. They ordered them around too much, saying: "You, boy, you do so-and-so!" According to the story I've heard, anyway, the slaves didn't even get to sleep in the same place as other people: they had to sleep together with the pigs.
>
> Miadana: I've heard about that kind of cruelty as well.
>
> Ramanana: That's what really did it—they ended up brooding, distracted; their hearts carried a guilt [*tsiny*], and so they were defeated.

There were two different, overlapping explanations of the *andriana*'s situation being offered here. One—the one emphasized by Miadana—was that as slave-owners, the *andriana* had lost their taste for work. Hence as soon as the two were on anything like equal footing, they weren't able to compete. This was a very common way of representing things. But behind it lay another, more like Ranaivoson's. The *andriana* had abused their power, they carry a burden of guilt, and so now they are few in numbers. Even the reference to scripture (extremely unusual in such historical accounts) recurs. This too was a very common way of thinking about Betafo's history. From all I can make out, just about all the *andriana* of Betafo at least suspected their current poverty might be punishment for ancient guilt. But it was not the sort of thing anyone liked to openly discuss.

The difference between the two sides of the mountain, between Betafo and Andranovelona, is especially striking because archival sources make clear that in the nineteenth century the socio-economic status of two communities was almost precisely the same. Both were dominated by a handful of prominent families who owned most of the slaves; in both, the majority of families were relatively poor. True, one was *andriana* and one was *hova.* But about all this meant in practice was that one was exempt from certain kinds of royal

service. After the French conquest, in both communities, the wealthier families all left. Now, the *hova* of Andranovelona see themselves as the scions of the oppressed, who have become prosperous even as their oppressors have slowly died away. The *andriana* of Betafo see their own ancestors as oppressors, and feel they are growing poorer and declining in numbers as the result of that ancient guilt.[4]

The Andrianamboninolona of Betafo: Official Histories

In the first chapter I mentioned my initial meeting with Rajaona, the *President Fokontany*. Armand led me in to see him in his home, next to the small white building which housed the *fokontany* offices. He had been warned of my coming, and when I arrived, two of his sons were sitting over a little chest where they had arranged one or two French books about the history of Madagascar, and a small handwritten notebook.

Here is what he first said when I turned on the tape recorder:

> President: Now, we, then, have our Great Ancestor [*razambe*] who appeared here; whose name was Andrianambololona.
> David: The Great Ancestor of Betafo?
> President: Yes, the Great Ancestor here in Betafo. The man's name was Andrianambololona. And his first arrival here took place in the year 1713. 1713 [reading the date in French from the notebook]. And the date of his death: he died in the year 1741. As for the woman who was his wife, her name was Rafotsitsifanomponiolona, and she in turn died in 1732. They had a single daughter, named Razafinandrasana . . .

. . . who in turn died in 1797. The dates of birth and death were carefully written out in the little notebook, a book which was otherwise full of accounts, information about plant medicine and the like, and the president seemed to feel that these very precise dates were the main significant thing he had to convey to us: whenever Armand and I asked more specific questions, he kept apologetically explaining that he only knew what the oral traditions (*lovan-tsofina*) had to say on this issue, he didn't have anything actually preserved in writing.

Granted, I was a foreign researcher asking questions about history, and foreign books represented history largely as a matter of names and dates. I was also speaking with this man in his capacity as *President Fokontany*, whose main duties involved keeping track of names and dates in official documents. He was clearly trying to give me what he figured I would want. But this was

the only time I asked anyone about local histories and found them presenting me with dates, let alone precise dates from a period in which there was no one in Imerina who had even heard of the Western calendar. After a bit of further discussion, in which Armand and I coaxed him into telling us a bit of the oral traditions, the president escorted us past the huge ruined mansion of Atsimonkady to *tampon-tanana* and showed us the *razambe*'s tomb, a large concrete structure, recently whitewashed. On the door at the top of the tomb, written in careful red letters, were the following words:

Andrianambololona 2 October 1713

When he did get around to the oral traditions, the *President Fokontany*'s account was a fairly typical example of deme origin stories: his ancestor had originally come from Fieferana, but abandoned that place in search of new lands; he came first to Betafo, then moved to a hill called Ambohimandrohitra further west, then after some other peregrinations returned to Betafo once again. The story differed little from most of the other versions I heard. The most complete version I recorded was told not by him but by one Rakotovao, one-time pastor of Betafo's Protestant church, now a farmer and blacksmith in Ambohimanjaka. He was the man who had given the speech detailing the deme's history at the Great Ancestor's last *famadihana,* so this was as close as I ever got to an official history. Certainly it was the only one which forms a coherent narrative.

Rakotovao told me:

> We come from Fieferana, to the northeast of Antananarivo. There were the origins of our earliest ancestor, Andrianambololona. (The name of his wife, though, I forget—it was long ago, and I'm a person of a later time. If you really think about it, we don't even know how many generations it's been since then: we must be at least the twelfth generation of descendants. At the very least.)
>
> The reason they left Fieferana, it was because the land there was scarce and, they say, infertile (it hardly produced crops at all)—so he went to live in Betafo. But having lived here in Betafo, he still looked out to the west where there was still lots of forest, and the land largely unoccupied. So he moved south and settled to the northeast below Ambaribe, to the south of Fiadanana. But he didn't end up settling there either; he followed that valley west and settled rather far away, on the peak of Ambodimandrohitra.
>
> And having settled there on the peak of Ambohimandrohitra—well, we are the fifth rank of *andriana*. That is, historically, we are the fifth in descent from the Sovereign. There are seven ranked ancestors, and we're descended from the fifth. But the Andriamasoandro [who already lived around Ambohimandrohitra] were descended from the fourth. So the two groups didn't get along because these others were arrogant. Whenever our ancestors were hosting a celebration

for a child's first haircut, the others wouldn't come; so he and his wife didn't stay on there, they said, "Let's leave this place, because what's with this?"

So they separated from them.

He came back to live down to the east of Ambaribe again, and then moved to Fiadanana, where he founded a church. And having founded a church there, he found himself hemmed in because most of the land around there belonged to people living in the east. Since there wasn't enough land, he went off to ask the king who was in Antananarivo for some—saying, "There's a territory we'd like to settle there." So the owners of the land here were shunted aside to the east side of the present road. It was by pushing them aside that we got ourselves a place here.

So when he lived in Fiadanana, he built a church there. And then he moved from there to Ambohinatao, but he didn't really like that spot either, so finally he moved back to Betafo.

It was there in Betafo he found his posterity; it was there he had his children. He had six: a single daughter, and five sons. Four of those sons are buried in those tombs in Betafo, but the fifth is on the hill behind Ambaribe to the west.

He went on to detail how the daughter is buried with her father, the first three sons in a tomb called the *Telo Milahatra* (or "Three-in-a-Row"), the fourth in Andrianony, the fifth—the one everyone else said had moved away after quarrelling with his older brothers—somewhere to the west. Characteristically, Rakotovao skipped over the note of conflict until Miadana tried to pin him down on the matter:

Miadana: But they say he moved out here because the kids didn't get along with one another.

Rakotovao: This is the reason they didn't get along: they were building that church. . . .

David: The one here in Betafo?

Rakotovao: The one here in Betafo; and while they were building the church, the one youngest son got distracted playing some game. He was making little clay sculptures and jumping around there in the doorway. So the five brothers got into a fight; they ended up all attacking each other, and the one who lost ran away to Ambohinatao saying, "I'm going so we won't have to live together any more!"

This, actually, was a typical approach to incidents of conflict in Malagasy times: if you can't skip over the issue entirely, then try to make the whole thing look ridiculous. The reader will recall the account of the quarrel between Andrianamboninolona and Andriamasoandro in chapter 3, in which all the characters were represented as acting like selfish children.

Rakotovao's narrative goes further than most in systematically omitting or euphemizing every incident of conflict. Where most accounts represent the

razambe's relations with Andriamasoandro as an outright quarrel or contest, he makes it a mere lack of sociability. So too in the case of the previous inhabitants of the eastern part of the territory: Miadana had to question him again before he explained what was really happening here, that the land was already occupied by *hova*, and that the *razambe* appealed to the king to have them forced away. Their descendants ended up in the villages to Betafo's northwest.

Later, I asked if there were any previous inhabitants of the western half of the territory as well:

> David: So was there no one else living here when he first came?
> Rakotovao: Well, there were other people over there [pointing east], but here in the west it was still open. That's how he was able to settle here. Or, really: it was abandoned land [*tany haolo*], as there were *Vazimba* who lived here. The *Vazimba* were driven away with music, and sent off westwards.
> David: How's that?
> Rakotovao: The *Vazimba* were driven off with music and drums, and went off west. They beat drums, and shot off guns . . .
> David: And it was Andrianambololona who did this?
> Rakotovao: Yes. That's how he was able to get land to live on here.

In this context *Vazimba* means "aborigines," "savages," the one-time inhabitants of a territory whose descendants have been driven away. The motif of frightening away the aborigines with music and loud noises is a common one in Merina oral traditions; though I didn't hear it often in Betafo. What I really want to draw attention to, though, is how consistently details like this are covered up, in the original account. The narrator tells his story as if convinced there is another, more dramatic story behind it, which shouldn't be revealed, at least at first. If the audience doesn't make the effort to tease out the hidden episodes afterward, it all remains unsaid.

Stripped of all conflict, the official version—the one fit for recitation at public events or narration to foreign researchers—becomes a simple, monotonous account of apparently whimsical movements in space: the Great Ancestor arrived, he settled here, then he moved there, then he came back here again, all without the slightest shred of motivation.

I reproduce this text not only to show what such origins accounts are like (it is fairly typical), not only to make a point about the suppression of conflict, but also to provide a framework on which to look at the actual origins of the Andrianamboninolona of Betafo. It might not be a very interesting story, but there is every reason to believe large parts of it are true. All the most important

elements in his account: the arrival from Fieferana, the conflict with the Zanak'Andriamasoandro, the appeal to the central government, and the break between Protestants and Catholics (the story of the quarrel over the church)—might well reflect actual events.

Historical Reconstruction

Let me take the three major elements of the story in turn, and see what documentary evidence can be brought to bear on the subject. These are

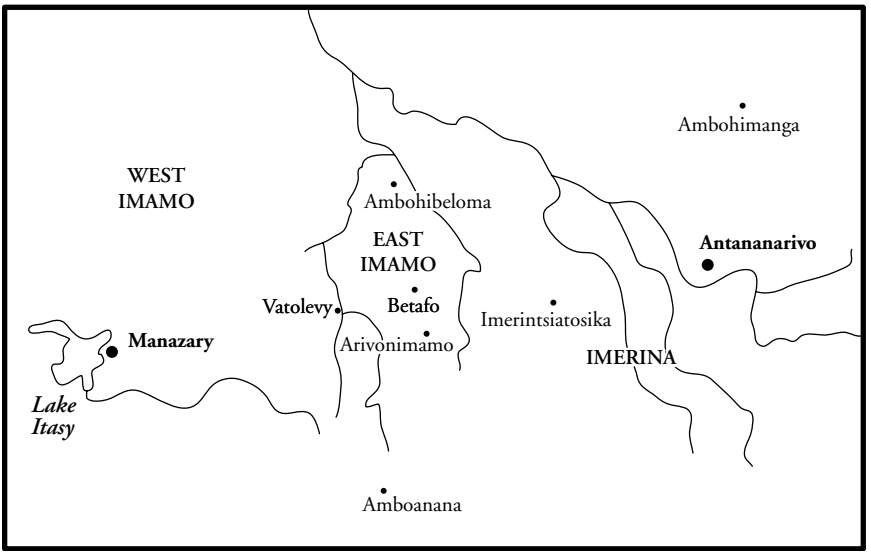
1. The origins of Betafo's *andriana*
2. Relations with the Andriamasoandro and other groups
3. The split between Protestants and Catholics

Origins

There is every reason to believe the ancestors of Betafo's *andriana* did come from the region of Fieferana, the ancestral territory of the Andrianamboninolona. They appear to have been military colonists (*voanjo*) established there by the Merina king Andrianampoinimerina when he conquered the then-independent kingdom of Arivonimamo.

Until 1806, Arivonimamo had been the seat of an independent principality, which, like Ambohibeloma to its north, traced back to an ancient western kingdom called Imamo.

In 1806, King Andrianampoinimerina, having managed to unify all the old warring principalities of old Imerina, led his armies into the region west of the Ombifotsy River.[5] The war lasted two years, but by the end of it, the rulers of both principalities fled or were killed and the entire territory was secured. Andrianampoinimerina installed his own relatives in the two capitals, but he also granted lands to three groups of devoted followers from his own home territory north of the capital: one small group of hova from the Tsimiamboholahy deme and two groups of *andriana*: the Andriandranando (placed in Ambatomivolana) and the Andrianamboninolona (placed in Betafo).[6] The *hova* occupied a village called Ambohitsoa, on the northern slopes of Mount Ambohitrambo; the two *andriana* groups on either side of Mount Ambohidraidimby: one, a famous group of smiths, presumably placed where they



2. Two eighteenth century kingdoms

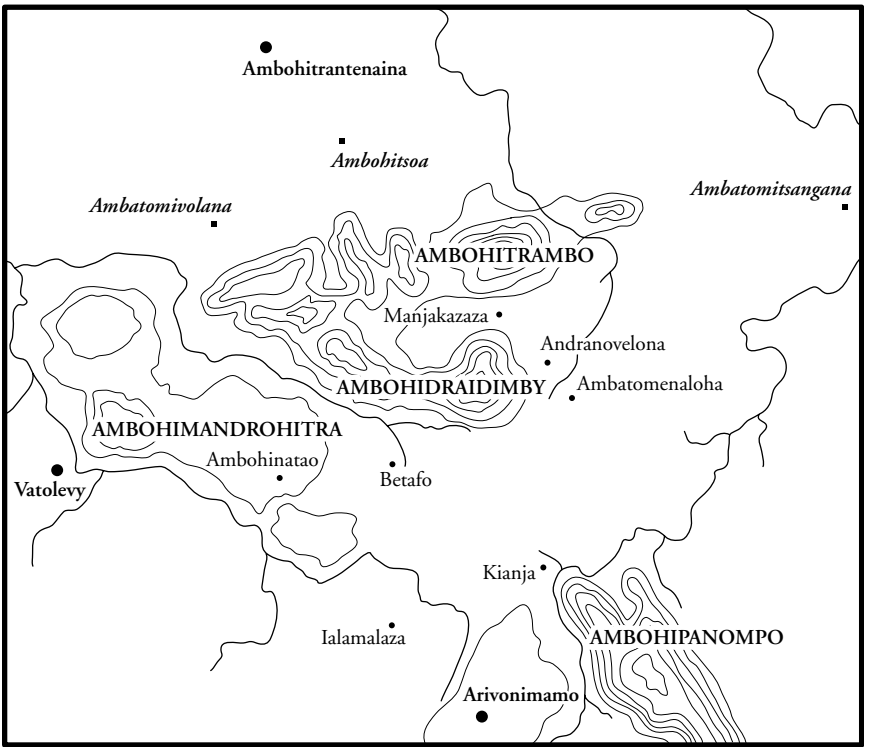
were to control access to the village of Vatolevy, which had important iron deposits; the other, in Betafo, to safeguard Arivonimamo. All three groups seem to have been declared exempt from the most onerous forms of royal service, and were grouped together in an administrative district of their own, a "100" (this meaning a group obliged to provide 100 men for royal labor projects) whose "chief of 100" always seems to have lived in Betafo itself.[7]

At the time, each group probably consisted of a dozen or so families.

Relations with the Andriamasoandro

Just about every version of the origins of Betafo records some kind of trouble with the Andriamasoandro, the people who live to its immediate west. Most add that Andrianambololona had once moved to live on Mount Ambohimandrohitra, in the heart of Andriamasoandro territory, and was eventually forced to leave and return to Betafo. This story too appears to have an historical foundation.

In 1808, one of King Andrianampoinimerina's sons attempted a rebellion; the plot was discovered and the prince was put to death. According to



3. Ambohitrambo Region, c. 1880

nineteenth-century traditions (Callet 1908:1040, 1044), among this prince's most prominent supporters were the "Zanak'Andriamasoandro of Vatolevy," descendants of the former royalty of the kingdom of Imamo. After the rebellion was put down, the king had the entire deme removed from their ancestral territories around Mount Ambohimandrohitra and reduced to servile status as punishment. While the text makes no mention of their neighbors in Betafo—who had been established there only a year or two before—it would hardly be surprising if they took advantage of the opportunity, or even, if they were granted the now-empty lands.

At any rate, the text does go on to say that in 1810, representatives of the Andriamasoandro appeared before the king and asked for his forgiveness, whereon he relented and allowed them to return. Whereon the Andrianamboninolona would, presumably, have had to return to Betafo once again.[8]

The Rift between Protestants and Catholics

In this case, we are dealing with an event that certainly did occur: already in 1878, when the first records were written down, the populations of Ambohinatao and Fiadanana in the southwest of the territory—who traced descent to the youngest of the five brothers—were entirely Catholic; the rest of the deme uniformly Protestant. It is not entirely clear how, or why, this happened. During the late 1860s and early '70s, after the queen's conversion, just about every group in Imerina converted to Christianity. The usual pattern was for the more privileged to convert to Congregationalist Protestantism, which was effectively the kingdom's official religion: those with some sort of grudge against the established order would then convert to Catholicism, which was at the time barely tolerated by the regime. Sometimes, however, the split would simply echo traditional rivalries: if one political faction was the first to embrace Protestantism, their rivals would almost inevitably become Catholic (Raison-Jourde 1983, Ellis 1986). Something like this appears to have happened in Betafo.

Oral traditions and documentary evidence (such as it is) confirm that the Protestant church was founded first, in the village of Betafo itself. The parish included the entire Andrianamboninolona territory. As we shall see, the chief of 100, Andriamaharo, was probably also the organizer of the local church. Later, the junior branch of the deme that inhabited its southwest broke off and converted to a rival faith.[9] Ramena, the long-time catechist from Ambaribe, told me that the first church was in Betafo:

> Ramena: And all of the descendants of Andrianamboninolona would pray together there. They were all Protestants; there were no Catholics yet. But the people from here in the west—Fiadanana, Ambaribe, Ambohinatao—used to arrive for services late; often they would show up in the afternoon. And there were leaders [*lehibe*] of the church—we still remember them—and those leaders of the church kept watch for each person, fixed the number of people (other than the leaders themselves of course). They had watchmen at the door of the church, they say, and they would hold up torches and count the people as they came in. Whoever came late was beaten, and they would put pebbles on the ground and make them kneel on the pebbles in the middle of the church.
>
> And that they say was what caused the separation.

A man named Rakotoarivo, from Ambohinatao, lead the rebellion against this high-handed behavior:

> Ramena: Because he knew that there was a priest in Arivonimamo at that time . . .

> His wife: It was he who bought the book from the priest, the Catholic book which had everything in it from catechizing to evangelizing . . . He used it to teach the people, and so all the descendants of Andrianamboninolona here in the west became Catholics. He was the catechist.

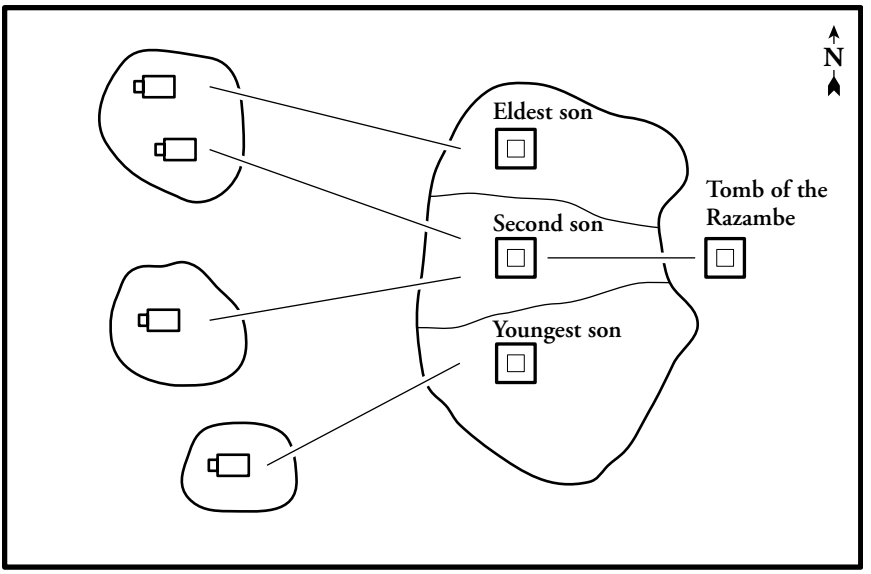
This is a very unusual account, because it presents a legitimate grudge between groups of roughly equal status. Normally, accounts of past conflict fall into one of two kinds: either the parties are vastly unequal (kings and subjects, masters and slaves), in which case the matter is represented as oppression, or they are equal, in which case it is represented as foolishness. The latter was the approach taken by Rakotovao (the former Protestant pastor) when recounting the same events; as also by Ranaivo the Bolt, another Protestant, who told me the church really split up because the elders were so caught up in their own egotistical quarrels they didn't think about religious matters at all—it all came to a head one Sunday when several elders actually came to blows in the middle of holy services, and half of them stomped off, vowing never to return. Ramena's account instead appeals to the idiom of oppression.

It's curious that the priest in his story would have demanded money for his book; but then, Rakotoarivo seems to have been a very wealthy man. He was probably the richest man in Betafo next to Andriamaharo himself. He also seems to have been a very old man, at least in his late sixties or seventies at the time.[10] While Ramena's account of the brutality of the church elders might well be accurate, Ranaivo the Bolt's version is probably not entirely inaccurate either: the whole thing probably came down to a quarrel between two important elders from different parts of the deme. Even the image of the elders exchanging punches inside the church is sufficiently similar to Rakotovao's story about the five brothers fighting inside the same building that one might feel justified in suspecting it is the echo of an actual historical event.

The Hierarchy of Tombs

The other point of all such histories is to establish hierarchical divisions within the deme.[11] Hence the importance of the ancestor's five sons. In fact, no one in Betafo could trace an unbroken genealogy that connected them to any of these five sons. Relatively few could trace beyond their own great grandparents.[12] If they could place themselves within the hierarchy at all, it was because of the position of their family's tomb.

In principle, all the tombs located within a deme's territory can be placed



5.1. An idealized representation of tombs branching off from an ancient village in the east to three later villages in the west

along an overall genealogy because they were all founded by descendants of the same ancestor. Here's how it works in the abstract. Say a man moves to a new, empty territory and founds a village there. He has four sons, and when he dies, they build him a fine tomb, and divide the village into quarters, with the eldest son taking the part furthest to the north or east. Each is ultimately buried in a tomb in their respective quarter. Once, it is assumed, each group of descendants occupied their own quarter, next to their ancestor's tomb—in which they too would eventually be buried. But as time went on, it grew crowded, and many of them began to move farther and farther west across the territory, founding new villages for their own descendants. As time went on, too, these most ancient tombs began to fill up, and some families started building new tombs closer to their homes. Over time, there would be a third generation of tombs, even a fourth . . . Anyone who expects to be buried in one of these new tombs will still remember which of the old tombs it "came out" of, so as a result, the organization of tombs inscribes a pattern of historical memory in the landscape, in a form that makes it seem one of its most permanent features: since tombs, whether ancient earthen tombs or new ones made of granite and cement, were the largest and most durable structures one

saw in the countryside, much contrasting with the mudbrick walls and houses of the living.[13] It also makes it possible for people to remember which line they are descended from, and hence, their seniority within the deme.

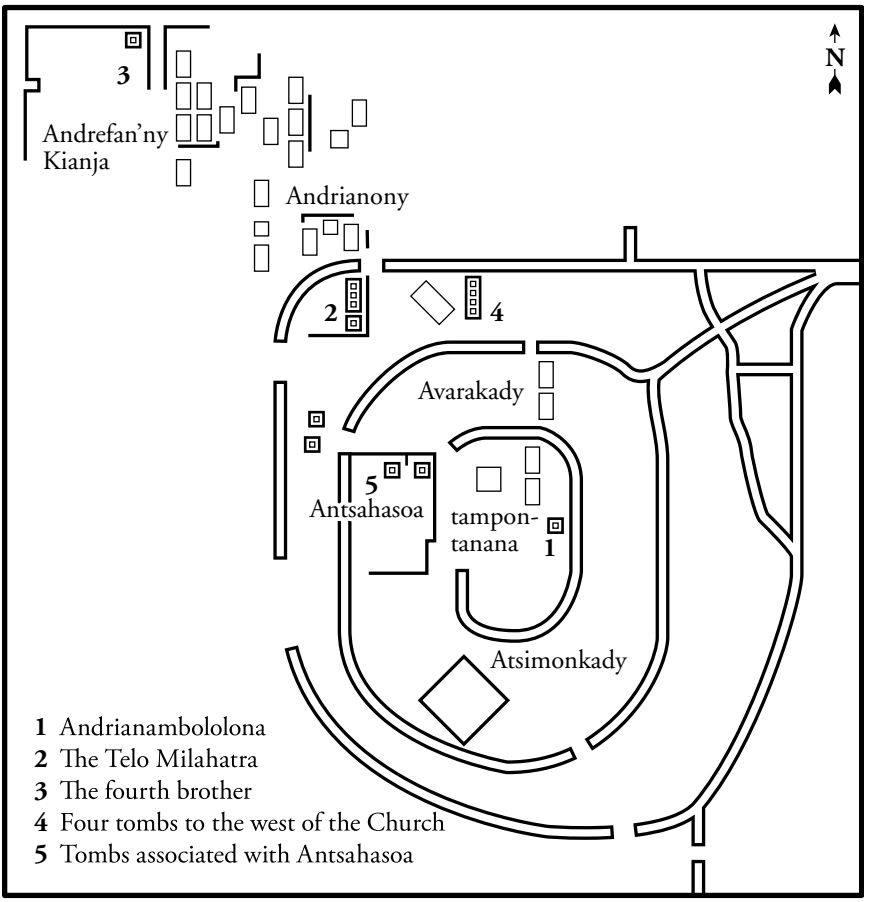
So it works in theory. In reality, no one was quite sure how the parts all fit together.

In Betafo, Andrianambololona was buried with his wife and daughter in an impressive white stone tomb in the part of the village everyone called *tampon-tanana*—literally, the "top of the town," the very center of its three rings of moats. Four of his five sons[14] were also buried in Betafo. Three are, as Rakotovao explained, in a group of three tombs called the *Telo Milahatra* ("the three-in-a-row"), located in a little walled enclosure directly to the west of the church. The fourth is a single isolated tomb within another walled enclosure, further west. It's called *Andrefan'ny Kianja* ("to the west of the Kianja"). The youngest son—the one who quarrelled with the others—is not buried in the village: his tomb is near an abandoned settlement on a low hill in the very far west of Betafo's territory, half an hour's walk away. He is now considered the ancestor of Betafo's Catholics, who live in the village of Ambaribe.

No one remembered the brothers' names,[15] but people did indeed trace back to their tombs, and several told me that all *andriana* were ranked accordingly. However, when I tried to get details about this ranking system, I failed miserably. No one could provide a complete list—many in fact insisted there were seven divisions, not five, though they were unclear as to why—and the vast majority didn't have the slightest idea where they were supposed to fit in. There was a broad feeling that those buried in the *Telo Milahatra,* especially those who used to live on *tampon-tanana,* were the most exalted, but that was about it.[16]

This is not to say there was no way of sizing up another person's ancestry. One could categorize people by "where they were originally from," which meant, in practice, in which of the five[17] ancient quarters of Betafo their original tomb was located. These were indeed ranked, and just about everyone agreed as to their order, which ran like this:

1. Betafo (*tampon-tanana*)
2. Atsimonkady
3. Antsahasoa



5.2. The quarters of Betafo, with its most ancient tombs

4. Avarakady
5. Andrianony

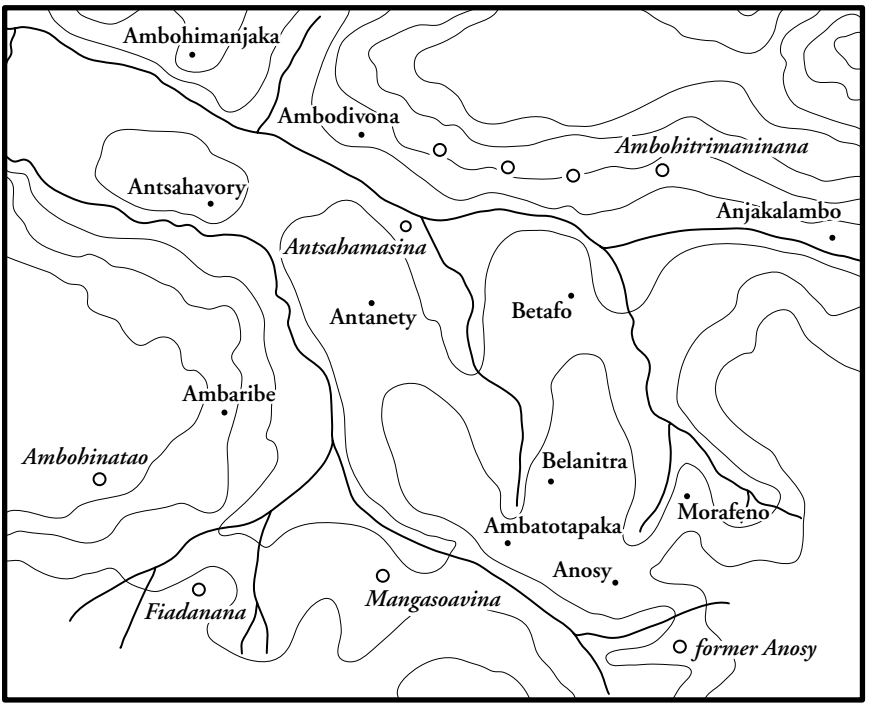
Tampon-tanana was, as I've said, the area in the very center of the three rings of huge circular ditches that surrounded Betafo. It was considered to be the home of the wealthiest and most exalted *andriana*. Some even insisted it was only this area which was Betafo proper, strictly speaking. Though the first three brothers are not actually buried there, they are sometimes spoken of as if they were, since most of the famous ancestors buried with them are assumed to have lived there.

Atsimonkady ("to the south of the moat") is really just an extension of it, since its founder was originally from *tampon-tanana.* It never consisted of more than a single house, now ruined.

Antsahasoa is a walled compound directly to the southwest of *tampon-tanana,* presently uninhabited. It was once the home of the descendants of Andriamaharo, a family nearly as prominent as the *tampon-tanana andriana*; it still contains their tombs. There are two of these: Andriamaharo's own, and that of his son Andriamihagarivo. Both probably date to the 1860s or '70s.[18] Everyone assumed Andriamaharo must have been quite close to the *razambe,* but no one had the slightest idea how he fit into the overall genealogy.[19] They were certain, however, that his descendants were second in rank to the *andriana* buried in the *Telo Milahatra.*

The ancient inhabitants of Avarakady ("north of the moat") and Andrianony are usually represented as "little" *andriana*: farmers and blacksmiths rather than slave-owning aristocrats. The first is a small quarter to the east of the Protestant church, which now houses a single *andriana* family, whose head is named Ranaivo the Bolt. Directly west of the church are four extremely old tombs, barely visible as low mounds rising from the dry brown grass. They are probably even older than the "three-in-a-row"; they are also located directly to their east, these should really have been the senior ones. In fact, they fell outside of accounting completely; partly, because almost no one could remember who was buried in them.[20] The most ancient tomb in Andrianony is the *Andrefan'ny Kianja:* the fourth of the five brothers; and it is assumed to have been largely his descendants who inhabited Andrianony when it was still an *andriana* settlement. Nowadays, its inhabitants are almost all *mainty.* There are also two more recent tombs there, considered offshoots of it.

Most of the *andriana* currently living in the territory of Betafo can at least trace back to one or another of these tombs, through some link or other. Still, the historical structure was loose, and it was in constant mutation. Ambitious men or women would build new tombs, moving in the bodies of one or two illustrious ancestors to be its *razambe.* Tombs would be emptied and begin to disintegrate. The inhabitants of *andriana* villages to the west of Betafo—Antanety, Ambaribe, Ambohimanjaka, Antsahavory—had their own tombs, which sometimes were said to "come out of" tombs in Betafo proper, sometimes, from tombs now sitting amongst abandoned villages nearby. Often only one or two old men even claimed to know the details. The really important thing is simply that everyone assumed such a hierarchy did exist.



4. Territory of the Andrianamboninolona of Betafo

Betafo in the Nineteenth Century: A Thumbnail Sketch

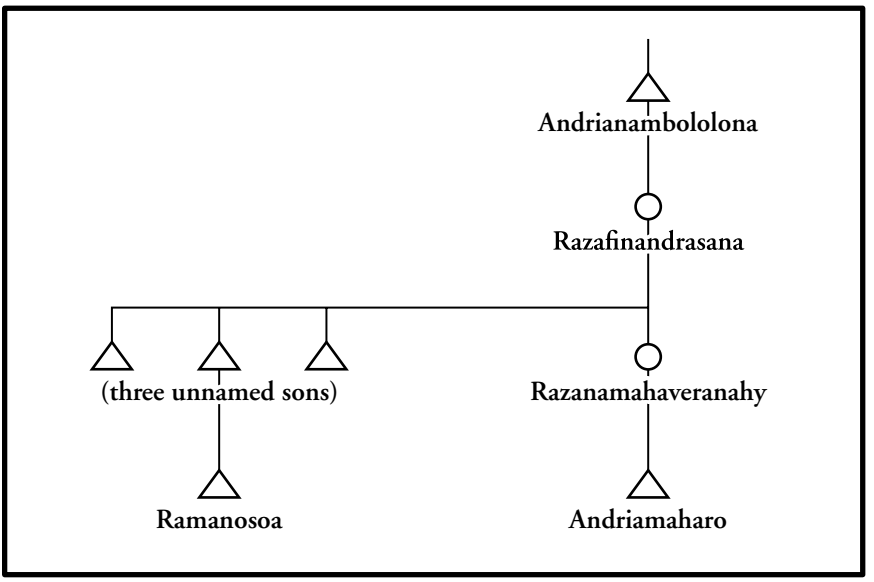
As I said in the introduction, the area surrounding Arivonimamo was always far from the center of political events. It was a place where not much ever happened; hence, it is little mentioned in major historical sources or foreigners' accounts. There is not a single reference to Betafo in the *Tantara ny Andriana* (Callet 1908), in the writings of Malagasy historians like Raombana, in the *Firaketana*—the Malagasy encyclopedia—or in any missionary account. Similarly, I wasn't able to find mention of the place in any published source from the colonial period. However, there are a huge number of administrative documents from the Merina kingdom preserved in the National Archives in Antananarivo, including two census documents from 1842 and 1880, and by carefully sifting through them, and comparing them to colonial-period documents, I was able to reconstruct a good deal of what late nineteenth-century Betafo was like.[21]

Among the latter were a series of manuscripts written by a former inhabitant of Betafo named Rakotonarivo Auguste, some of which preserve genealogical information which he claims to have learned from men and women born in the 1860s and '70s. If that information is accurate, and Andrianambololona was indeed a real person, the *President Fokontany*'s dates might not have been that far off: he would probably have been in his prime in the early eighteenth century.[22] He certainly would have been dead by 1808.

Now, it seems unlikely that the original military colonists from Fieferana were all descendants of a single individual.[23] It is not inconceivable: the dozen or so households which first settled in Betafo might have traced descent to someone who had lived in Fieferana in the eighteenth century, and they might have moved his body when they built their tomb at the center of its newly constructed moats, to represent the unity of the community. More likely, though, Andrianambololona was the Great Ancestor of one or two of Betafo's most prominent families, and it was only in the latter part of the last century that he came to be seen as the founder of Betafo as a whole. But all this is only speculation.

What the two census documents do reveal mainly concerns the distribution of property. While Betafo grew in size between 1840 and 1880, the overall economic picture stayed pretty much the same. In 1841, there were 91 households consisting of about 227 individuals,[24] as well as a total of 140 slaves. In 1880, it was 144 households of 348 people, and 226 slaves. In both periods, slaves made up about 40 percent of the total population. And while there was a slight tendency for the rich to become richer, the basic distribution of wealth remained pretty constant: in both periods, a handful of very wealthy families controlled a large chunk of the entire slave population (28 percent in 1841, 40 percent in 1880), with the rest of the slaves divided up surprisingly evenly. Only the poorest third of families had no access to slave labor whatsoever.

Probably, in practice, the real dividing line was between those who still had to descend into the mud to work their fields, and those who could have them entirely worked by servile labor. Certainly this is how the "great *andriana*" of past times are imagined nowadays. And some of these wealthy families do seem to have managed to live lives of leisure. "They have all their needs attended to by slaves," wrote William Johnson, a Quaker missionary who worked in the region in the 1890s, "their beds made, clothes washed, food cooked and even cut up for them, so there is nothing much to do but eat food and sit about talking scandal" (in Ratrimoharinosy 1986:202).



5.3. The core line

These dynamics become clearer if one turns to the histories of the leading families of Betafo.

Great Men of Nineteenth-Century Betafo, Part 1: Andriamaharo

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Betafo seems to have been divided between two families: one, which descended from a man named Ramanosoa, dominated *tampon-tanana;* the other, and the descendants of a certain Andriamaharo.

While Ramanosoa's family seem to have had the best claim to seniority, the earliest records—from 1841—indicate Andriamaharo's was currently ascendant. At the time Andriamaharo himself appears as "chief of 100," which was as close as there was to an officially recogized leader of the community; he was probably the richest man in Betafo, with sixteen slaves.[25] According to oral traditions, it was he who maintained the *sampy* which protected the community from hail and other dangers.

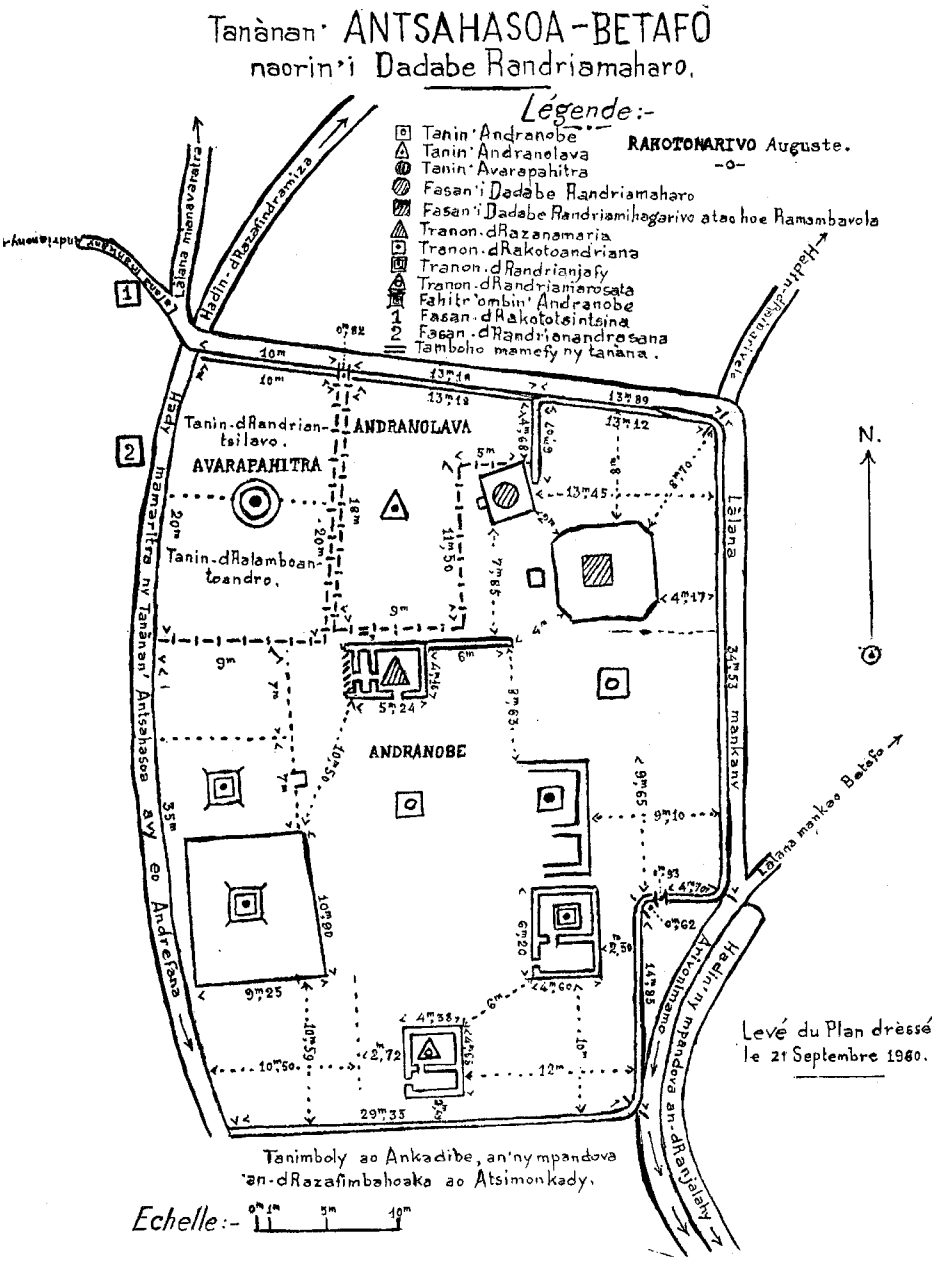
According to traditions, Andriamaharo had three wives, founded a small walled precinct of his own, just south of *tampon-tanana,* and divided it between descendants of the three of them. It seems unlikely though that there

was ever a time when all of his descendants lived there, because his line was extremely prolific, and the precinct itself was not particularly large.

Details are sketchy, but one has the impression of a family well connected to other noble families in central Imerina, and at the fore of Betafo's ritual life. Oral tradition makes Andriamaharo the keeper of the local hail charm, and though the old man was probably dead by 1867, the founding year for Betafo's Protestant church (Clark 1887:141), church documents always place his son and heir Andriamihagarivo at the head of the congregation, and lists of church elders consist almost exclusively of other members of the family.[26] The Catholic tradition suggests they conducted themselves, at first, in an entirely coercive fashion—as was not at all uncommon in these early years, when missionary oversight would have been almost negligible, and community leaders often treated church attendance as service to the queen.[27]

By the 1880s, when documents allow the community to really come into focus, Andriamihagarivo appears to have still been living in the walled precinct of Antsahasoa, with a somewhat reduced estate of twelve slaves and fifteen head of cattle, in part shared by a larger group of Andriamaharo's descendants, which by then consisted of at least six or seven other households.[28] The family was clearly on the decline: during the years before the French invasion, few members held prominent office, and the AKTA registries that began to be kept after 1878 record them gradually liquidating their relatively meager remaining stock of slaves.[29]

By first generations of the colonial period, the decline of the family's fortunes became precipitous. Not a single member of the family attained an officially recognized position in Betafo—as notable, pastor, teacher, or the like—let alone won a place in the administration or passed into the liberal professions as doctors, medics, or engineers. Andriamihagarivo lived on Antsahasoa until his death at age seventy-seven, in 1904. His son—who lingered on for a decade or so—was, however, its last inhabitant. By around 1910, the quarter was abandoned. Descendants of junior lines dissolved into surrounding villages, becoming simple farmers, and not particularly wealthy ones at that. Others left Betafo entirely, most taking advantage of newly opened lands out west. Even now there is a little colony of Andriamaharo's descendants in the district of Mahasolo, including the current holder of the key of Andriamihagarivo's tomb. They, at least, are comparatively wealthy: in the 1970s they had the tomb very expensively done in stone, something which their cousins in Betafo would never have been able to afford.



5.4. Tananan Antsahasoa-Betafo

There is no way to know exactly why this family declined so rapidly, but one factor was clearly their complete failure to take advantage of new forms of power and influence that began developing in rural Imerina in the 1870s and '80s, based on the medium of writing. The fact that the AKTA books document their decline may not be entirely fortuitous; these registries were created as part of an effort at centralization, to create an administrative apparatus that would penetrate even the furthest reaches of the Merina countryside. In Betafo, the people actually keeping the books were not Andriamaharo's descendants but their rivals in *tampon-tanana.*

Part 2: Ramanosoa and *Tampon-Tanana*

According to Miadana's mother-in-law Elizabeth, there was no love lost between *tampon-tanana* and Andriamaharo's descendants. Residents of *tampon-tanana* used to spit in disdain every time they passed the wall of Antsahasoa. But by the time Betafo's affairs leap into focus, when AKTA registries begin in 1878, they had clearly replaced them as its most important family.

In part, this was a result of the same reforms that created the registries themselves. By the late 1870s, rural parish schools had been functioning long enough to produce their first crop of students, and the prime minister instituted a set of reforms, meant to create the institutional framework for a centralized state. At the time, the Merina army was full of men in their fifties and sixties who had been drafted in their youth and spent most of their lives languishing in some provincial post or as an "aide de camp" of some important military official. In 1876, the prime minister allowed most them to retire to their ancestral lands, at the same time, commissioning them as a rural constabulatory (called the *Sakaizambohitra*, "Friends of the Villages") charged with keeping the peace, arresting criminals, keeping registries of sales, contracts, and adoptions, maintaining roads, and ensuring children continued to attend the schools. The country was divided into districts, each with a complement of between twenty and forty retired officers. Each was also provided with two or three younger soldiers (armed with rifles) and two secretaries—generally, selected from among the brightest graduating students identified in nationwide exams held the year before. It was they who actually kept the books and conducted correspondences with the central government (Randrianantoandro 1988).[30]

Among these retired officers was a certain Rasoavelo 6 Honors,[31] the eldest son of Ramanosoa. Like many of the officers involved in the slave-raiding wars of the '40s and '50s, he had come into a bit of wealth: according to the census of 1880, his twenty-four slaves and seventeen head of cattle made him far and away the richest man in Betafo.[32] Officially, he was just one of twenty-three *Sakaizambohitra* who all reported to a central office established in Ambohitrambo; in practice, he seems to have established himself as the local police authority in Betafo, relying little on his commanding officers.[33] This must have been made infinitely easier by the fact that his eldest son, Ralaitsivery, had also been named as one of the district's secretaries.

Ralaitsivery's name first appeared in documents a few years earlier, in 1875, when he was named as one of the top three students in Betafo's mission school.[34] A few years later he was one of its instructors.[35] This was aside from his duties as secretary to the *Sakaizambohitra*. It was Ralaitsivery who actually kept the AKTA notebooks, preserving the evidence for his family's increasing wealth in carefully dated entries of sepia ink.

It was Ralaitsivery, too, who conducted correspondence with the central government, and it was probably he who, for the ordinary farmer, actually represented the power of the state. His influence continued long after his father's effective retirement. Around 1885, for example, the regime decided to decentralize authority, the retired officers were relieved of their official duties,[36] and each *fokon'olona* was in theory allowed to elect its own representatives and regulate their own affairs. Elections were held in 1886. In Betafo, no one from *tampon-tanana* was elected to any of the posts, but nonetheless, Ralaitsivery continues to be listed in documents as secretary—apparently, with exactly the same functions as before.[37] The AKTA books continued to be kept much the same way, and there's no change in handwriting between the two periods.

The Colonial Period

By the mid-1880s, Rasoavelo begins to fade into the background, as his sons Ralaitsivery and Andriantonga began to take his place as the chief figures on *tampon-tanana.* Ralaitsivery continued to keep the books and, it would appear, continued to assume that he would be able to go on doing so even after the French conquest of Madagascar in 1895. True, he was not chosen for the new colonial administration, but the post of Governera Madinika, the admin-

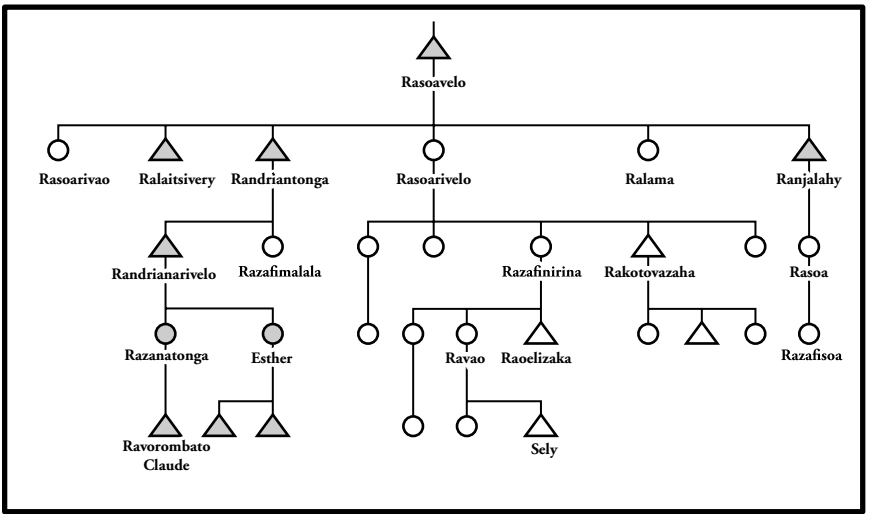
istrative officer in charge of the district including Betafo, went to his younger brother Andriantonga.

For the first few years after the conquest, between 1895 and 1901, the district office was in Betafo; afterward, it was moved to nearby Andranovelona. Ralaitsivery accompanied his brother, to help him with his work. According to oral traditions, he also seems to have begun making himself a figure of traditional authority as well. In the early days of French rule, some old people told me, Betafo was plagued by witches, and it was Ralaitsivery who revived the poison ordeal to root them out.[38] Still, he seems to have been endlessly bitter about having been passed over for an official post. Or, what really irked him was not the fact that he received no position, but the fact that a younger man, a former student of his at Betafo's Protestant school, did. This was a man named Rakotovoalavo, or "Rakoto the Rat," a man who until 1895 had been a slave, but afterward was made *mpiadidy,* the governor's assistant. This story too has been preserved in oral memory. For almost a decade Ralaitsivery is said to have waged an endless campaign of persecution against the man, never missing a chance to embarrass or humiliate him, to the point where, in 1904, his victim could not stand it any more, and hired six bandits to murder him. Ralaitsivery was beaten to death with rice pestles; Rakoto the Rat was arrested, tried, and deported, never to be seen again.

This, however, is a story that will have to wait for chapter 9.

Of Andriantonga, there are few fond memories. Under the French, the main task of low-level administrators was collecting taxes, and he was notorious for his techniques of intimidation, of frightening and humiliating those who hadn't paid. Miadana—whose husband was his great-grandson—first told me the most common story about him. It's a play on his name, which literally means "the *andriana* who comes":

> Miadana: This they say is what the man used to do. He would come to collect taxes. And he'd be carrying a belt. And belt in hand, he'd have all the inhabitants come out and this is what he'd do:
>
> If someone hadn't paid their taxes, he'd say, "What is my name?"
>
> The man wouldn't reply.
>
> "I said: what is my name?"
>
> And the man would say, "Ingahy Andriana, sir?"
>
> "No, that's not it! I said: what is my name?"
>
> So he'd answer, "Andriantonga, sir?"
>
> "Ah, so I'm *coming* now to collect the taxes!" And [she strikes the table]—he'd crack the belt like a whip, right next to him.



5.5. Descendants of Rasoavelo

One woman from Arivonimamo whose father had been a clerk in Andriantonga's office told me he was notoriously cruel. Whenever he'd have to spend the night in a rural village, she said, he'd assemble the leading villagers and demand, "Where's my wife for the evening?"—and the villagers would have to provide a woman for his bed.

Here is a simplified genealogy of Rasoavelo's descendants. Shading indicates men and women who either held government positions, or who spent most of their adult lives away from Betafo.

The senior line, then, essentially left and became, effectively, part of the urban bourgeoisie.

Soon after the murder of his brother, Andriantonga was reposted to Amboanana. He doesn't appear to have spent a lot of time in Betafo after that. Rasoavelo probably died a year or two later, and Andriantonga himself in 1915, relatively young. Still, for the first several decades of the century, *tampon-tanana* was mainly occupied by descendants of Rasoavelo. Unlike the descendants of their old rivals from Antsahasoa, they managed to maintain something of an elite lifestyle; or at least, this is certainly how turn-of-the-century *tampon-tanana* is remembered now: as a place of tall houses and majestic pillared verandahs; its men always wore shoes and its women carried parasols; at parties, they would appear in bright silk robes and wearing gold

tiaras. They never descended into the mud of the fields, but watched from the hillsides as their former slaves labored below at harvest or replanting, having cattle slaughtered and cut into strips of meat to reward them for their efforts.

Andriantonga's son Randrianarivelo (1890–1926) trained as a medic in Arivonimamo, and was posted to Ambatolampy in southern Imerina, where he married and had two daughters. These two daughters, Elizabeth and Esther, were both still alive in 1990, but had only lived in Betafo for a year or two over the whole course of their lives. Both ended up marrying civil servants and living in the capital. It was much the same with their children: Elizabeth had eight, almost all functionaries or functionary's wives, though one, Ravorombato Claude, became ill and had to retire early, and ended up returning to Betafo in 1985. He, of course, is married to Miadana.[39] Of Esther's two children, the daughter lives in the capital, the son is currently in France.

By the twenties, *tampon-tanana* had lost a little of its former glory, and there were only twenty-four people living there in six or seven houses when the fire destroyed most of it in October 1931. Few of the houses were ever rebuilt. Most of their occupants relocated to Andrianony or Belanitra; one childless spinster, Razafimalala, the governor's old daughter, refused to move, but when she died in 1937 the place was finally abandoned. Eventually her brother's inheritors hired a carekeeper for her house, but he was a black man not even from Betafo. He was still living there when Miadana and Claude returned in 1985.

Part 3: Andrianaivo the Younger

Not all of Rasoavelo's descendants ended up government officials, or even, really, members of a leisured class; a fair number ended up having to get their hands dirty and descend into the mud. His younger brother, Andrianaivo, was distinctly more successful in propelling his descendants into an entirely different social class.

In 1880 Andrianaivo was not quite as fabulously rich as his brother (he had fourteen slaves, not twenty-two), but if anything his fortunes were even more on the upswing. He does not seem to have gotten on all that well with the rest of the family—I heard some suggestions (again, from Elizabeth) that this was because of his marriage to a woman from Antsahasoa.[40] After the birth of his first son in 1886, he moved away to build a house on a previously unoccupied strip of garden land to the south of *tampon-tanana,* thereafter

referred to as Atsimonkady ("south of the moat"). Atsimonkady never consisted of more than a single house. However, it was an extremely impressive one, certainly the most impressive in Betafo: three stories tall, its second-story verandah supported by eight stone pillars with elaborate capitals, the whole compound surrounded by a wall over twelve feet in height. The building has since fallen down, but the compound's walls are still intact; Rajaona told me they had been made by mixing clay with milk. Others said egg-whites, but all agreed it was wonderously strong.

Andrianaivo had three children before dying unexpectedly in 1894: two boys named Ralaimanarivo (1886–1945) and Rabe Leon (1894–1931), and a daughter named Raketaka (1900–1945). Once again, for most of the family's history, it was a woman—his widow, Razanabahoaka—who was actually in charge. She managed to ensure both her sons received an excellent education, because both had achieved the rank of *administrateur civil* at a relatively young age. At first, the family remained in the mansion in Atsimonkady, attended by a number of live-in *mainty* servants. Raketaka, like many daughters of successful men, never married but stayed on the paternal estate. However, the brothers soon began to receive postings further and further away from home. In 1921 Ralaimanarivo, then 35, was already governor of Ambohitrantenaina—having achieved the same rank as his uncle Andriantonga a generation earlier. Five years later (1926–28 at least) he'd risen even further, becoming Chef du Canton at Ampahimanga. The rest of the family followed him to his posts, though they seem to have reappeared periodically in Betafo. Eventually, Rabe too embarked on his own career, but he died young, after having been posted to Tamatave, on the malarial eastern coast, at the age of 37.

The family, then, was already only an occasional presence in Betafo after the first decade or two of the twentieth century.

Like Andriantonga's descendants, Andrianaivo's children managed to break from the rural world entirely. Both had mainly daughters, almost all of whom ended up marrying members of the educated elite. None ended up in Betafo; few of their children have ever set foot in the place.

Ralaimanarivo's two sons both studied for advanced degrees. The younger one, Rahoby, became an engineer, and spent much of his subsequent life commuting back and forth between Paris and Antananarivo. I never met him—he died a few months after I started visiting Betafo—but his family was every bit the prosperous Merina bourgeoisie. Their house in a wealthy suburb of

Antananarivo had a spacious garden, VCR, and expensive stereo equipment that would have seemed an impossible dream to country people; the one time I visited, in search of documents, it was full of attractive young people in designer clothing, several with electric guitars, affecting a blasé disinterest in anything that had to do with me.

Rahoby's older brother, Rakotonarivo Auguste, was born in 1906. Rakotonarivo Auguste (he's always referred to by his full name) studied medicine at the university in Antananarivo, and everyone expected him to become a doctor. He was, by all reports, an avid student. But in his final year in medical school, something cracked. The word almost everyone in Betafo used in describing the phenomena to me was a French one: *surmenage,* "overwork," "brain fatigue"—as if after a life of intensive study, he suddenly just couldn't do it any more. Probably in America they would have called it a nervous breakdown. In the end, Rakotonarivo returned to Betafo, and remained there for the rest of his life. No one was willing to be very explicit about the matter, but the consensus seemed to be he was somewhere between highly eccentric and mildly insane.

Ranaivo the Bolt claimed his mind had been destroyed by witchcraft. "Ah, he was learned!" he exclaimed, when I first mentioned the name. "But there was a weakness. His level of education was high indeed, but because of someone's act of spite his brain turned backwards, and he never received a high government position, but just degenerated."

Rakotonarivo lived in Betafo continually from 1925 until his death in 1970. He married three times, and had five children. For most of his life he remained in the decaying mansion in Atsimonkady; towards the end of his life its roof caved in, and he moved to Belanitra, spending his last few years near his last wife's family. About half of his grandchildren were still living in and around Betafo when I was there; the rest were in Antananarivo.

Rakotonarivo had many interests, I was told. He was the secretary for the church; he was very much concerned with the idea of maintaining an alarm bell in the church's steeple, to protect the town from bandits.[41] His greatest interest, though, was in local history. Throughout my time in Betafo, I had to sit through endless monologues about just how much I could have found out if only I had been able to speak with Rakotonarivo Auguste. He had a comprehensive knowledge of every aspect of the history of Betafo. What's more, he kept track of everything that happened in his own day. He had written books. Many claimed that he had kept his own *etat civil*, that he had a book in

which he recorded everything that happened in Betafo: every birth, marriage, and death, every *famadihana,* every notable event.

To some degree this was simply a reflection of rural people's image of *fahaizana,* education, know-how. This was, as I've said, based on the bureaucratic procedures people were familiar with from dealing with the administration: deeds, registries, official documents. The one thing everyone knew about Rakotonarivo was that he had immense *fahaizana;* hence, they saw him as continually generating these things. But these stories are not pure fantasy. He did keep the parish records, which contained some annotations of this sort.[42] Like a traditional elder, he had detailed knowledge of oral traditions, but he told these stories with a very literate attention to names and dates.[43]

If Rakotonarivo never produced a comprehensive history of Betafo, the main reason was that his writings were so obsessively concerned with himself. The book of genealogies, for example, is mainly concerned with tracing back to each of Rakotonarivo's *razambe,* then tracing downward to everyone else who was descended from them; then doing the same for each of his three wives. He himself appears seven different times over the course of the book. It is prefaced by a note demanding his descendants keep it up after he is dead. The notes on tombs are similar: most of his other annotations either concern details of the life of his relatives, or, especially, proof of his ownership of fields, courtyards, wells, or buildings in and around Betafo—sometimes, accompanied by beautifully drawn maps and diagrams, precisely surveyed. As several people told me, "none dared take him on in court." Even the early historical traditions were proof of his own exalted ancestry. It was as if, having been reduced to the tiny social world of Betafo, Rakotonarivo brought all the vast reserves of technical knowledge at his disposal to bear on making himself as significant an elder as anyone could possibly be.

In this he was not entirely unsuccessful. He is certainly remembered (for all his eccentricity) as an extremely venerable, ancestral figure.[44] In other ways too, he used his skills to bridge the gap between "*Vazaha*" and "Malagasy" forms of knowledge. I once asked if he had ever used his medical training to treat people in Betafo. Well yes, I was told, sick people would often come to him to see if their conditions were medical, or the effects of sorcery—whether they should go to the clinic or a medium.

> Armand: He also knew how to do astrology but he didn't do it professionally. And he was also a witch catcher—but he never told anyone about that, except for my father who had a pact of blood brotherhood with him.

I also heard that "he was able to move tree stumps"—to do magic.[45] That's what my father said: Rakotonarivo once told him he would do that at night, but I don't know if it's true or not.
David: He was able to move tree stumps? What for?
Armand: I have absolutely no idea.
David: But I don't see why someone would want to do a thing like that.
Armand: I don't know, but that's what Dad told us. Maybe he just did it for his own amusement.

Finally, as Sely first told me, he could find lost ancestors. If someone needed to establish the location of an ancestor in a tomb, or the identity of one whose name had been forgotten (which, as I've pointed out, is often) they would always come to him; he would produce a handful of beads and a glass bottle, and use them to divine the answer. The surprisingly accurate dates in the president's notebook and on Andrianambololona's tomb (as Armand did finally admit to me) were ultimately discovered by the same techniques.

Memory and Violence Revisited

With Rakotonarivo Auguste, the means of producing history also becomes its principle subject-matter, its producers, its chief protagonists.

Even in the 1840s, the main sources one has for the history of Betafo are the products of bureaucratic procedures. My information on Andriamaharo's Betafo, for example, comes from a statistical breakdown carried out by secretaries trained in keeping accounts and ledgers in the earliest mission schools: a breakdown which carefully listed the number of households who had just one slave, the number who had two, and so on, indicating, in additional columns, the total number of slaves owned by households of each category, and the total number of cattle owned by each as well. These documents were created to make tax assessments. The same is true of the 1880 census, part of an effort to collect an emergency tax called the *vidim-basy,* for buying rifles to prepare for a likely war with France. The science of writing down names, of enumerating things and dating them, has always been the instrument of a coercive regime.

When I asked who were the greatest men of Betafo's past, its true *Ray amandreny*or elders, I would almost always hear the same basic list of names: Ralaitsivery, Andriantonga, Ralaimanarivo, Rabe Leon.[46] But if I asked about what these individuals were like, what I would usually get were one of two things: wondering remarks on their *fahaizana,* or accusations of injustice.

Ralaitsivery endlessly abused his brother's assistant, and finally, was killed for it. Andriantonga extorted sexual favors and beat peasants with his belt. (If Ralaimanarivo and Rabe Leon largely escaped the tar of people's memories, it was because they administered territories far removed from Betafo itself. Ratsizafy, one of the few people left who had actually met them, described how one could bring a document to either of them, put it down on the desk, and they would read it upside down, before you had the chance to tell them what was in it. "Beasts, they were!," he said. But he meant it in the sense of "amazing.") More generally, these skills themselves were—as I have already argued—seen as inextricable from the coercive nature of the colonial system which trained them. The techniques themselves were means of extracting money and forced labor, the men who used them wore military uniforms and were backed up by armed gendarmes; even if the names and dates they wrote down were also the very stuff of history.

This is not just my perception; people in Betafo saw it that way too. Many were convinced there was an actual book, co-authored by some combination of these men. One common version had it that the first section was written by Andriantonga, the second by Ralaimanarivo, and the third by Rakotonarivo Auguste. Some imagined it to contain annotated genealogies; others, both genealogies and (carefully dated) historical accounts. There is no reason to think such a book ever existed, but many of Betafo's inhabitants insisted that it must.

Actually, I heard about a lot of imaginary books when I was in Madagascar. Instances ranged from the wealthy lady from the capital who annoyed Chantal by telling us that instead of traipsing around the countryside asking about local history, I should just go buy a *guide touristique,* to the medium who insisted he had a book on divination which would set forth in clear, diagrammatic form all the wisdom that lay behind his art. Often all this was just a dodge: figure out what the man wants from you, tell him there's a book that will reveal more than you could ever reveal yourself. The book, it always turns out, is in another town, in the possession of someone's cousin, but they can probably get their hands on it in a week or two if they talk to the right person, someone who should probably be passing through town next Tuesday, or, if not, then almost certainly the week after that. It would never actually show up. But all this was more than just a way of fobbing off annoying researchers. People often really did take it for granted that, whatever book it was they thought I was trying to write, someone else had probably already

written it. In the case of local history, of Betafo, the situation is the exact reverse of what Benedict Anderson has called an "imagined community." Anderson, of course, coined the latter phrase in arguing that modern nationalism creates a sense of community—one implicitly modeled on the experience of face-to-face community like a village, where everyone knows one another—among people who never meet, but are united only by their habit of reading newspapers, written texts. In Betafo we have a real face-to-face community, a village, whose inhabitants imagine their unity to be embodied in nonexistent texts.[47]

I have described how memories become lodged in stones and tombs, and so contribute to the establishment of a sense of community. Standing stones, memorials to some act of communal agreement by the ancestors, continue to have a certain type of *hasina*, or force—sometimes seen as the force of ancestral intentions, sometimes, as something inhering in the stone itself. They embody a potential for violent retribution that underpins the continued moral solidarity of the community. Tombs are stones as well, but memories of the ancestors inside them can be seen in two ways: they can be seen as what holds the community of living descendants together, or, as the memories of dead individuals, trying to prevent their names from being forgotten. In so far as ancestral violence enforces the one, it can still be seen as essentially moral, and ultimately justified; insofar as it is purely egotistical, it sets the living in an implicit battle with the identities of the dead. Effacing the memory of the ancestors becomes an endless struggle—and also, a very ambivalent one, since if it were ever entirely accomplished, descendants would be set entirely adrift from their history and, hence, tantamount to slaves.[48]

Now, consider in this light genealogical texts and histories. Though people are perfectly capable of writing down the genealogical connections and placement of bodies in the tombs, they almost never do.[49] Instead, they make do with a rough genealogy of tombs which provides the hierarchical framework of a deme, culminating with the Great Ancestor, who embodies its overall unity. But as I've said, no one really knows how most of these tombs connect with one another. There is merely the feeling that somehow they must; and perhaps, the feeling somewhere, someone must know how. Perhaps the elders know it (though everyone would also insist most real elders were now dead). Or more likely somewhere, in town or in the capital, is an even more precise and comprehensive explanation. The precise links and connections between the living and the ancestors do exist, elsewhere, preserved in

the very words written down by the famous elders of the past. These histories and genealogies were the true history of Betafo.

Even as living humans gradually wipe away the traces of memory inscribed in the landscape, seeing it as ultimately a form of violence, they imagine the whole to be preserved elsewhere, the integuments and connections to be written down, in another type of memorial composed through a series of techniques which are, ultimately, just as much mediums of violence and coercion—if anything, even more so—by men who had found their homes in the coercive apparatus of the colonial regime. Even the location of the imagined books—always in a town or city, seat of government offices and administrative center, away from the community itself—is obviously significant in this respect. Writing from outside is what unifies the community, which thus sees itself as peripheral—though this in its own way is nothing new. When speaking of going from a village to a town, a town to the capital, one always speaks of "going up": places of greater administrative importance are always by definition higher places (whatever their physical placement), and the implication is that just as kings once looked down from their mountains, just as royal sway was defined by the gaze between mountains and valleys, so still the administrative system is one of oversight, with the places of registering and writing being conceptually higher partly because those in them gaze down on the places below.

Lofty Things Fall Down

People in Betafo were usually reluctant to admit that Rakotonarivo was slightly crazy, but they would eventually mention it, a bit apologetically, if you discussed him long enough. There was one other issue no one talked about at all. I only found out toward the end of my time there, when I started asking in detail about the ownership of land. This was a very delicate issue at the time. For decades, as Ramanana had been telling me, the *andriana* had seen their rice fields being slowly gobbled up by their former servants; occasionally by marriage, more often, by buying them. It was *fady* to sell the *tanin-drazana,* the land of the ancestors, but it happened anyway. Whenever a poor *andriana* was short on money, some black person would offer them a loan; always, the collateral was land, always, the lenders moved to repossess as soon as possible. This was what she meant when she said the *andriana* had been defeated.

Armand often told me about the great friendship between Rakotonarivo

and his father, Ranaivo. They had become blood brothers, just as Rakotonarivo had with several other *mainty*. Once I asked him, how exactly did Rakotonarivo support himself after he left medical school? Did he farm? Well, he farmed *a little,* Armand replied.

Later, we were going over a map Miadana's family had made for me, tracing out the history of each rice field in the valleys immediately surrounding the village of Betafo. For almost half the fields in certain valleys, the story was the same: the field belonged to Andrianaivo the Younger, Rakotonarivo inherited it, then he sold it; now it belongs to some black person.

> Armand: Even our own lands to the west of the village, they all belonged to Andrianaivo the Younger. Rakotonarivo sold them.
> David: So that's why you were saying "he didn't farm his fields much" . . .
> Armand: He just sold them. He was the son of a rich man; he wasn't used to the work, he wasn't used to anything like that. Because in the days of royalty, it had been easy to get slaves to do everything for you. So he wasn't used to working. Once the great men were dead, once the colonial regime was over and slavery was gone, he didn't know what to do; all there was left to do was just sell off his inheritance. It's not like it would have killed the man to do a little work, but he was lazy.
> David: So it was he who really sold off the ancestral land! Even though that's something that ought to be taboo.
> Armand: Well, there were some he couldn't sell . . .

Armand went on to explain that some of his possessions were held in common with his brother, Rahoby; those, at least, he did leave to his children.

> Armand: And it was he who was the last to live in that abandoned compound. And that too he didn't keep up; that's why the house collapsed because if he'd taken care of it, it wouldn't have fallen.
> David: But he was lazy?
> Armand: Lazy. Then later Rahoby almost fixed it up, but before he could complete it, it collapsed. He had cleaned out the whole area inside, got the well working again, got everything working. He was about to repair the house when those huge pillars came rolling down. Those pillars they probably wouldn't be able to repair, because those were made in the days of slavery. Because those are all really huge blocks of stone.

We return, then, to the self-destructive *andriana* of the beginning of the chapter. He sat there writing out names and dates and documenting Betafo's history until the ceiling caved in and the entire house fell down. He was an aristocrat, an educated man, he wasn't about to go carrying baskets of manure on his head or wade ankle-deep through liquid mud. He had servants to do that. Nor was he particularly effective in managing his holdings. Instead, he

used all his knowledge of the law and the coercive mechanisms of courts and deeds and documents to guarantee his exclusive title to plots of land so that he could sell them to his workers, who were much better at handling the cash than he. One field after the other, he sold his heritage away.

Recall the way Ramanana told the story. The *andriana* were abusive, they oppressed their slaves, ordered them around, they used to make them sleep among the pigs. As a result their hearts carried a guilt, they became "brooding, obsessed, distracted" (*sondriana*). They were lazy, not used to doing their own work. As soon as their one-time slaves managed to get some resources of their own, those former slaves began taking over: buying out the *andriana*'s rice fields one by one. Stories about the *andriana*'s cruelty nowadays seem mainly encapsulated in the memory of figures like Andriantonga. The woman who told me the story about his demanding "wives" from villagers concluded by warning me that such behavior never goes unpunished. If you yourself don't fall victim, then it will be your descendants who will suffer in the end. Look at that women Miadana, she said. She was wealthy once; when she first got here, she used to strut around like she owned the world. Now she's suffering.

But if the *andriana*'s cruelty is now encapsulated in figures like Andriantonga, their decadence is encapsulated in that of Rakotonarivo Auguste. It was especially his image that lurked in the back of people's minds when they spoke of the *andriana* as lazy, distracted, unable to compete. He was a man so obsessed by the past that he deprived his children of a future. His descendants that remain have nothing: they are smiths and simple farmers, even their great house has tumbled down.[50]

ANTI-HEROIC POLITICS

6

So far I have been talking largely about history, and particularly the authoritative version of the ancestral past in a place like Betafo. At first glance, this ancestral past seems a pretty dull place; having been carefully scrubbed of any element of conflict, the stories lack any possibility of drama. However, this is the thinnest of veneers, and particularly in a community like Betafo, all it takes is one or two pointed questions for the stories of rivalry and oppression to begin rolling out. In this chapter I want to proceed in the opposite direction, and talk about the mechanisms of day-to-day politics: which, in a place like Betafo, is ultimately about how such struggles and rivalry and forms of oppression are ultimately transformed into ancestral authority.

Let me set out from a point that I made in the introduction, that in the parts of rural Imerina I knew, there was next to nothing that could obviously be called a "public sphere" or "political arena."

I'm not the first to have observed this. In one of his more famous essays, Maurice Bloch describes how he arrived in Madagascar in the late 1960s, trained in political anthropology, only to discover that the objects he was trained to look for were not there.

> As the result of a long period of direct rule by both the French Colonial Government and, following them, the Malagasy Government, there was no local political hierarchy of office holders which could claim any independence from a national hierarchy. As a result, problems of succession and the formulation of laws did not arise since most disputes were settled according to legal criteria which were totally independent and even alien to the people studied. Secondly, because of the particular nature of the Malagasy culture, the kind of disputes and dispute settlement which has been the concern of much political anthropology occurred only relatively rarely. I could therefore neither do a traditional political anthropological analysis, looking for a local political structure made up of

> office-holders and institutions, nor could I observe power conflicts when these emerged into the open; since they did not. My conclusion was that I had nothing to say about politics. (Bloch 1975:3)

At the same time, he continues, it was clear that people were constantly, in one way or another, telling each other what to do, and it was hard not to think of this as a political phenomenon.

In the end, the conundrum led Bloch to study the problem of political oratory and formal genres of speech. His central argument, in fact, became that in Imerina, the formal political sphere has become a sphere where nothing is supposed to happen. At formal meetings of "the *fokon'olona,*" by then an essentially colonial institution, elders deliver speeches with practically nothing in the way of propositional content, full of proverbial wisdom, sentiments which no sane person would possibly disagree with. Nothing is openly debated, nothing decided; all real decisions have been made beforehand, behind the scenes. Once the public event begins, the result is predetermined.

All this rather recalls Claude Levi-Strauss' famous distinction between games and rituals (1966:32–33), inspired by the fact that many Algonkian ceremonies feature competitive games which must always end in a tie. In real games, he says, the point is to take two things that start out the same (say, two football teams) and create a difference (winners and losers). Rituals, however, aim to create a higher unity out of different things, so the result is foreordained. His ultimate conclusion is notorious: that societies based on ritual reject history altogether because they do not allow the arbitrary differences produced by events to have permanent effects; instead, they simply reproduce the same fixed structure over and over again.

Nowadays there is next to no one left who actually believes that there are societies without history. Certainly Bloch is not trying to say anything of the kind. He was trying to make a point about the nature of authority. The core of his argument is that all political speech tends to resemble ritual in so far as both place radical limits on what it is possible to say. In Imerina, he argues, authority comes down to repeating the words and sentiments of the ancestors in proverbial language, or in carrying out rituals that are also statements of their ultimate rightness and authority. In either case, it is basically impossible to criticize the established order, to argue, suggest alternatives, to enter a debate.

I don't see much point here in entering into the debate which Bloch's arguments inspired—suffice it to say they were meant to be provocative, and succeeded. But I do think it's worthwhile to point out that it was much easier for

Bloch to make these arguments because the Merina political events he observed were, indeed, much more like rituals than like games: they are not supposed to produce outcomes that make a difference.[1] This is not the way politics is usually expected to work. One need only recall the phenomena of wars. Elections. Duels. Debates. Strikes. Trials. Legislative votes. Most of what we are used to thinking of as political phenomena, in fact, consist of game-like contests of one sort or another. No doubt this is one reason Levi-Strauss could connect games to history: if the political sphere, in so many societies, consists largely of a series of little arenas in which important people (usually posing as representatives of larger groups) fight out contests that will have broader effects on society as a whole, then history has consisted largely of accounts of the most significant of these contests, of their winners and losers, and of what effects their winning or losing had.

Bloch also makes an important argument about gender. Many argue that all societies distinguish between a public sphere identified especially with men, and domestic sphere, identified especially with women; and that one way that women are suppressed is by being denied full access to the public arena.[2] Bloch argues Imerina is no exception. But one extension of the ritualized nature of public discourse in Imerina is that—as I have already pointed out at some length—authoritative men tend to avoid displays or references to conflict, so that it is especially women who voice it, just as it is especially women who are publicly critical of established verities. Though Bloch never quite phrased the matter this way, it's as if the silencing of women's voices, and the silencing of colloquial criticism of the established ritual order, here become much the same thing.

Part 1: Political Action; or, The Structure of Stories

When I did my fieldwork, some twenty years after Bloch, I didn't find things to be very different. Even the collapse of state authority had not led to the emergence of new political offices or institutions to take its place.[3] On the other hand, this made the situation even more mysterious. In the '50s and '60s, people in rural villages were under the control of a fairly effective police state; they were not in a position to make many decisions for themselves. In the 1980s, the police were gone; one could no longer say that all the really important decisions were being made elsewhere. Somehow or other, the people who lived here were managing their own affairs. But how? Where does one

look, if the public sphere is a place where nothing is supposed to happen? How does one describe politics under such conditions?

The nice thing about anomalous cases is that they force one to rethink one's definitions. It seems to me in this context at least, instead of starting from the question "What is politics?"—since that immediately evokes the idea of a political sphere—it would be more useful to ask "What is political action?" What is it about an act that enables one to say it is political?

The most obvious response would be that actions are political in so far as they are intended to influence the actions of others (or, perhaps, just in so far as they do, because something can be unintentionally political). The problem with this is that it would mean that, with the possible exception of certain purely technical actions, all actions have some political component. This may not be a bad way of looking at things—but even when one says "Everything is political," one normally means something more. One implies that one's actions have a broader significance, that they relate to more general issues. So let me suggest a refinement. As a minimal definition, political action is action meant to influence others who are not physically present when the action is being done. This is not to say it can't be intended to influence people who are physically present; it is to say its effects are not limited to that. It is action that is meant to be recounted, narrated, or in some other way represented to other people afterward; or anyway, it is political in so far as it is.

Saying this is not a denial of the importance of a public sphere. Rather, one might say that this is what a "public sphere" actually is, that space in which everyone acts with the understanding that anything they do is likely to be more widely represented and remembered. If no such space is circled off, or, more realistically, if the legitimate ways of acting within it are radically circumscribed, the process will just become more diffuse and scattered, and, perhaps, a little more covert. Gossip and reputation, for instance, will probably take on a far more important role in the allocation of authority.

The greatest advantage this definition has is that it makes it impossible to think about politics without also thinking about the issue of representation. Politics is the process by which people act in the knowledge that their actions will be reported, talked about, narrated, discussed, praised, or criticized by other people. This, in turn, allows us to look at all sorts of familiar issues of representation in a very different light. For example, we normally tend to assume that true power is the power to establish definitive texts or authoritative versions of events—and by extension, that the person who gets to tell the

story of what happened is in ultimate control. But kings are rarely storytellers. They don't need to be. The truly powerful usually find other people to do the work of representing for them.

Adventures in Narrative Theory

While I was living in Antananarivo I still had a lot of time to myself, much of which I spent jotting down theoretical reflections in my journals. One of my great ambitions at the time was to develop a theory of narrative—and just before I left for the field, I had put together the outlines of one that would seem to have been tailor-made to complement this approach to politics.

The initial question I had started off on was: what is it that makes a story seem worth telling? What are the most common ways of framing daily events that would make them interesting enough to hold the attention of someone who had no prior interest in finding out about the matter? This struck me as a much better—or certainly, more anthropological—way to go about thinking about narratives than most existing theories on the subject, which tend to always concentrate on formal genres—fairy tales or novels, but rarely ordinary talk.

My first thinking about the matter set off from a remark by Frederick Jameson (1972:67–68): that in Russian folk tales the protagonists are always represented, at first, as people who are clearly not up to the task in front of them. Often the hero is a simple peasant boy, perhaps a simpleton or cripple, anyway, certainly no match for the ogre or sorcerer or king who's the antagonist; it is only the intervention of a magical helper which allows him to succeed. But it is just this lack of adequacy, he suggested, which makes the thing a story. It provides an element of suspense.

It struck me that this would have important implications for any theory of social power.

Consider the differences between what in different societies is considered men's and women's work. This varies endlessly across the world, but there are also some surprisingly consistent patterns. The main one is that short and relatively intense tasks, particularly those involving moments of danger, are almost always relegated to men; the most repetitive and monotonous sorts of work, to women. A good example is swidden agriculture, which requires burning away the existing foliage on a piece of land before planting it. In some societies that practice swidden agriculture, planting, weeding, and harvesting is

done exclusively by men, in others, almost exclusively by women. But even where women do everything else, it is always men who actually torch the fields. This is the one moment of the greatest drama, because when a fire is set, there's always the danger it might run out of control and wreak immense havoc. This moment of drama is always, everywhere, presided over by men.

One way to state the matter would be this: men tend to monopolize the sorts of work framed in terms of an implicit dramatic structure. Men, one might say, tend to get the sorts of work one can tell stories about afterward, women, the sort one tells stories during, to pass the time.

Why though should this bear out so consistently across cultures? Here, I think, one has to bring in politics and power. In any society, gender marks the most elementary division of power. What such a division of labor does, one might say, is to attribute to men the sorts of activity defined as memorable, narratable action; to define men as actors, and women as non-actors. It is constantly placing men on little stages, while ensuring that most of the work of actually producing and maintaining these stages, and making it possible for the men to appear there, is relegated to their mothers, daughters, and wives. The pattern is not limited to gender. It continues, to a lesser or greater extent, through every social hierarchy: the more exalted a group or status, the more their typical activities will tend to take dramatic form, one which lends itself to being told as stories afterward. The political domain is usually the most dramatic one of all.[4]

Another way to say this is that the more powerful a person or group, the more their archetypical activities are likely to resemble games. Many years ago, Johan Huizinga (1940) suggested that any number of common human activities tend to be organized like games. Games, he pointed out, are always characterized by certain basic features. There is always (a) a field of action, which is arbitrarily marked off from the rest of the world in space and time, (b) arbitrary rules, which apply within that field, and (c) a series of players, whose actions are motivated by (d) some goal they are not certain to attain.[5]

What I find especially interesting about this formulation is that its basic features precisely parallel a certain tradition of thinking about the relation of narrative and human action, one which goes back to Aristotle, reappears in Bakhtin, and whose most notable recent exemplar is probably Paul Ricouer (1984; cf. Danto 1965, Mink 1966, 1978, Gallie 1964, Rosaldo 1989). A story, according to this tradition, begins by posing some problem and ends with its resolution. Stories too are always characterized by certain features. There is always (a) a world, or field of action, marked off in space and time,

(b) certain arbitrary rules which define the sorts of action possible in them. There are also, necessarily, (c) a set of actors, and (d) some goal, which motivates them, but which they are not guaranteed of being able to attain. The two models have exactly the same form.

This not only makes it easier to understand what it means to say that certain types of action are intrinsically "narrativizable"; it also provides a clue as to why such narratives can serve as such powerful instruments of ideology—that is, why they not only determine who is an actor and who is not, but make it easier for those who are not to accept this situation.

Aristotle stressed that a story is an "imitation of action," which comes to an end when that action is resolved. It is not set in motion by characters; in fact, the characters in a story are themselves defined through what they do and what they suffer. Gallie, however, points out that while this might be true enough in the abstract, it is not at all true from the point of view of the story's audience. For the audience, the characters always come first: because if you don't identify with the characters, then you don't care whether or not they achieve their goals; and if you don't care about that, then you have no reason to follow the story in the first place. Gallie is content to leave the matter at that, but it seems to me this is exactly why narratives operate so well ideologically to naturalize arbitrary structures of power. If you care about the characters and whether they get what they're after, you just automatically accept the field and the arbitrary rules of the game as they are handed to you. If you care whether the prince rescues the princess, you do not wonder whether there are really dragons; if you care whether one middle-aged lawyer prevails over another in a legislative contest, you do not question why legislators are always middle-aged lawyers; if you identify with the heroic goals of your leader on the stage, you do not wonder too much about who is setting up the stage, or sweeping it up afterward—even if it is you.[6]

There is, perhaps, a second ideological effect as well, rather a subtler one. If narrative and representation really are the medium of politics, why is it almost never seen that way? I suspect that one reason has to do with the role of violence. The dramatic, suspenseful sorts of activity which I've said are normally marked off as male spheres of action are often violent ones as well: hunting and war are only the most obvious examples.[7] In so far as these become the models for all action, violence comes to be seen as the exemplary form of human action. In so far as these sort of stories are cast into a larger political stage, they are usually called "heroic narrative," which are

really little more than statements of the political significance of violence and violent men.

But here is where one might say there is a kind of ideological trick going on. If words and representation are a necessary element of politics, then the emphasis on violence so typical of these stories is in its essence a way of denying this. After all, just about every other way one person has of influencing another's actions must involve some form of symbolic mediation—whether by words or images or what-have-you. Violence is about the only way to influence another that does not require some sort of mediation.[8] This has two effects. For one thing, it means that violence is one of the simplest forms of action to represent. Its representation requires the least psychological skill or subtlety. But more important, perhaps, by concentrating on violence as the ultimate form of politics, the narrators deny the very importance of what they are doing in telling these stories. It could even be taken as a way of disguising the actual mechanisms by which power is reproduced in the very act of its reproduction.[9]

Second Thoughts

At this point the reader will no doubt have realized what's going on in my own narrative. Armed with my new theory, I came to Arivonimamo, and then Betafo. But here my experience was similar to Bloch's. The object I was prepared to study was not there. Nobody told these sorts of stories—or if they did, it was only very rarely.

This is perhaps surprising because *angano,* fairy tales (many almost identical in form to the Russian tales discussed by Jameson) were once quite popular (Haring 1982). They also featured a young man or woman faced with a seemingly impossible challenge, and prevailing through supernatural help, or trickery. Some even took on cosmological dimensions: obscure young men would challenge God, face him in trials and contests, steal away his daughter or win heavenly treasures such as rice to help mankind. Sometimes, when the heroes who marry daughters of God found ruling dynasties (e.g., Lombard 1976, Beaujard 1989, 1991), they became explicitly political. Stories like this are still popular in many other parts of Madagascar, but in Arivonimamo *angano* had come to be considered old-fashioned, childish, and rather boring, the kind of stories everyone is forced to learn in school.[10]

Of course my theory was not primarily about formal genres. It was about

informal talk, how speakers frame everyday experience to make it interesting. I spent a lot of time listening to ordinary conversations, at first, trying to make note of narrative forms. But here things were if anything even more striking. Daily narratives almost never took what might be called "intentional form." They were never structured around some individual's project of action, i.e., someone sets out to do something, it is not clear whether or not they will be able to, then you find out.[11] When speaking of their own experience, narrators were much more likely to represent themselves as passive witnesses to others' actions, implying as they did so that those others were not behaving quite as they should. Anecdotes were full of such phrases as "I didn't do anything," "We didn't say a thing," "We were just amazed." Miadana, for instance, had a tendency to represent Betafo as a community full of madmen, with her family and perhaps a handful of other reasonable people watching in dismay and confusion, waiting for everyone else to finally calm down. But this was just an elaboration on the way most women represented men's affairs. Men in such stories were inexplicable creatures that alternated between lazy inaction and apparently whimsical bouts of activity, driven by bizarre passions or starry-eyed projects. The one thing of which they were incapable, it was implied, was steady productive work.[12] Since it is women who tended to make the freest recourse to narrative forms in conversation, the effect was to turn the very rhythms of action created by the division of labor between men and women—the kind which I had argued tended to define men as actors—into proof that men were silly and impractical.

The only genre of story that was organized around a protagonist and their intentional project of action were tales of transgression and retribution.

My reaction at the time was to abandon the whole project; I didn't have much time for theoretical reflection anyway in Arivonimamo, all my free time was occupied transcribing tapes. In retrospect, I think my starting point—that stories hold one's interest through uncertainty—was reasonable enough; the problem was that I was working with far too simple a notion of where the locus of uncertainty can lie. The stories I took as my model were stories of suspense. Such stories are organized around their protagonists' intentions: someone wants to do something; the main thing the audience doesn't know is how (or whether) they are going to be able to pull it off. But there are many ways one can organize experience to make it interesting enough to warrant listening to. As a preliminary approximation, I might suggest three very common ones:

1. suspense: someone wants to do something: we don't know how he or she will be able to do it.
2. mystery: something happened; we don't know who did it, or why, or what it was.
3. reversals: someone wants to do something; we think we know what the outcome will be, but we are wrong.[13]

No doubt a longer list of basic narrative forms could be made[14]—but even among these three, one can detect some significant distinctions. In stories based on suspense, as I've remarked, the audience has to feel a certain empathy with the characters. In order for the story to hold their interest, they have to care about whether they attain their goals. In the other two they don't. The audience identifies spontaneously because following the story places them in exactly the same situation as its characters: in mysteries, both are equally ignorant, in reversals, both are equally surprised. No leap of identification is required because, rather than turning on intentions and goals, such stories turn on knowledge. This is certainly true of Malagasy stories, which, as we shall see, tend to dwell especially on the issues of knowledge, evidence, and truth.

Anti-heroic History

My core argument so far has been that politics consists of actions taken in the knowledge that they will affect others not present when one takes them; and that political power is the ability to stop people from acting in this way. To put it less epigramatically: political actions are actions which take place on stage, in the sense that they are meant to be more widely represented. The operation of political power in society is not to be confused with politics itself. Politics as I've defined it is an inevitable part of human life; power, the means of its partial repression. It is the system which regulates who is to be allowed access to these stages, and who denied it. It is a matter of preventing others from acting or speaking, or preventing what they say or do from influencing others. Its ultimate sanction is usually the threat of violence.

The language of political anthropology is full of terms like "fields," "stages," and "arenas."[15] In most societies, the pinnacles of power hierarchies are marked by game-like contests, marked off from ordinary society, with their own, arbitrary, rules: what happens in these spaces will be repeated, explained,

and remembered. This is partly because the decisions made within them have repercussions on the society outside. Stories about the most important contests and decisions continue to be told, illustrated, even reenacted long afterward; and this is what history, in most societies, consists of.

But in this light, the Merina historical traditions I have been outlining in the last three chapters are quite unusual.

It's not that game-like contests do not appear in these traditions. Sometimes they do. Often, too, they are said to have had enduring effects on society. What is missing is any suggestion that they *should* have. Instead, they are made to seem ridiculous. When ancestors stage fights between dogs or bulls, or engage in kicking contests, when several brothers come to blows because one of them was playing with toys when he was supposed to be working, contests that lead to major historical ruptures are being represented as little better than children's games. If these people had been behaving like adults, it never would have happened; if they hadn't been so childishly stubborn afterward, stomping off and refusing to have anything more to do with each other, it would never have had enduring effects. This way of looking at history can genuinely be labeled "anti-heroic," because it takes the very sort of confrontations that would elsewhere be the main theme of heroic history, and presents them as an example of the way *not* to behave.

All of this is apiece with the great disapproval for public confrontation. But the rejection of heroic history goes further. In historical traditions, as in ordinary conversation, there was a tendency to avoid presenting protagonists as intentional actors who actively "make history"—in the sense of imposing their will upon the world. This had a powerful effect on basic assumptions about how politics was to be conducted, because people generally did not claim authority by identifying themselves with the desires or intentions of people of the past.

Let me explain something of what I mean by this. The phrase "heroic politics" normally brings to mind visions of Homeric Greece or the world of the Icelandic sagas, or, if one is an anthropologist, perhaps, of the eighteenth-century Maori of New Zealand (Sahlins 1985; Johansen 1954). In such societies, history is the story not only of wars, duels, and other contests, but also of oaths, alliances, betrayals, marriages and infidelity, insults and murder; people still keep track of whose grandfather ambushed whose, who stole someone else's bride or rescued them when they were most beleaguered. As a result, the living are saddled with all sorts debts and unsettled accounts, and

the political world becomes a web of personalized obligations: favors to be repaid, insults or injuries that cry out for vengeance. This sense of debt is just what's dramatically lacking in Imerina, where no one would admit to having traditional rivals or enemies, and situations of violence or conflict—when they are not considered foolish vanity—were represented as matters of systematic oppression which do not need to be avenged, because they will avenge themselves.[16]

Toward the end of his life, the Merina king Andrianampoinimerina is said to have made a declaration that the sea was the only border for his kingdom. By saying so, he was expressing the intention to unify the entire island of Madagascar in one kingdom. At the time, this seemed a very distant goal, since he had only very tenuous control of the highlands, and none of the coast, but it was largely realized in the reign of his son Radama. For present purposes it doesn't make the slightest difference whether Andrianampoinimerina ever really made this famous statement, or whether Radama just said he had. The important thing is that Radama was staking a claim to authority by making himself the vehicle for realizing the unfinished projects of people of the past. Most historical traditions are full of such unfinished projects and desires. Usually the projects are embodied in some sort of institution: a constitutional system intended to guarantee certain rights, an army built up with the mission of eventually reconquering occupied territory, a political party created with the intention of restoring the monarchy, or putting state power in the hands of the proletariat. Those who wish to claim political authority do so largely by identifying themselves with the purposes of the dead.

Nowadays, though, stories like Andrianampoinimerina's vow have been relegated to textbooks. If kings appear in oral history, they are figures like Andriantsihanika or Lailoza: either noble men who abandoned their power, or oppressors who misused it. Rarely are they seen as the founders of political institutions; more often, they are seen as having put an end to them. Certainly they do not embody purposes which others seek to realize.

Descent group founders are a partial exception. Descent groups are enduring institutions of a sort—and many people claim communal authority by identifying themselves with ancestral purposes, at least, in the so far as ancestors want their names be remembered, and the groups they founded to endure. The stories told about them are the closest one is likely to find to heroic narrative. At least they do act intentionally: they set out to migrate to a different part of the country, then they do so. Granted, there is very little drama in

these stories (when there is, it's usually covered up); but still, their actions are remembered, and those memories are seen as an active force which gives shape to contemporary society.

Earlier I argued that the emphasis on violence in heroic narratives has an ideological effect, in that it obscures up the role of representation—including narrative itself—in political affairs. While stories about the foundation of demes contain little violence, they do something similar by denying the existence of a wider society in which deeds can be reported. The protagonists move through an apparently uninhabited landscape; while they are often said to have brought along a family or entourage, the latter usually play no role in the action, most of the time, it's as if they don't exist. This is true even in stories about cursing, where the use of passive voice often makes it hard to figure out who is actually pronouncing the curse: the founder dies of overeating, the story says, and then "his descendants were cursed never to eat peanuts." By whom? His wife? His children? We're never told. In so far as these ancestral figures exist in relation to a larger society, in so far as they say and do things that have affects on other people, it is not contemporaries, but people not yet born.[17]

Consider too stories about how the founders of a community gathered together to raise a "stone of imprecations" at which to conduct ordeals. These are indeed stories about social interaction, even political action, and they concern the creation of enduring political institutions. But they contain a different sort of ideological trick. When people talk about these stones nowadays, they do not like to dwell on the ongoing institutional aspects. In fact, most do their best to avoid the entire subject of ordeals. Instead, they usually talk as if ancestral intentions—to maintain a moral community free of evil-doers—had become a power inherent in the stone itself. Why are thieves unable to live here? They are driven off by the power of the stone. Ancestral desires have become a form of invisible *hasina.* This too is a very common pattern.

I have already described how nineteenth-century medicine could be thought of as the intentions or desires of their creators, externalized and translated into concrete form. These were often political desires. Royal *sampy,* for example, preserved the desire to unify a kingdom, to protect it against its enemies. This logic has by no means disappeared. In fact it is crucial to understand contemporary politics, because in rural Imerina, a great deal of the most significant political action is carried out through the medium of medicine, and talk about it. The same is true of history. When past intentions are seen as having an effect

on the present-day inhabitants of Betafo, it is largely in the form of objects that were given *hasina* long ago.

Part 2: Lost Intentions; or, Stories about Trees and Objects

It is interesting to reconsider my analysis of *ody* and *sampy* in chapter 2, in the light of what I've had to say about political action and its mystification. *Hasina,* I argued, did not arise of its own accord, it had to be created by intentional human action. Often, like "stones of imprecation" it must be dedicated by an oath, which is both a public declaration of intent,[18] and an act of collective agreement. "Until the pledge of allegiance is given" an *ody* was "nothing but a piece of wood to them." Coins were given as an act of agreement to royal rule. Always, there was some agreement or consensus; always too, an emphasis on the power of words. Persuasive words were themselves a form of *hasina.* Even the powers of the elements of which an *ody* is composed are derived not from their forms so much as from their names.

All of this implies a kind of social theory. One way to phrase this would be to say that *hasina* is an intention or desire that can only be realized by being, first, agreed to—socially recognized—and then, embodied in an exterior object (a piece of wood, a silver ornament . . .) that represents it in some way. By carrying out the ritual and objectifying one's intentions through these means, one attains the power to produce effects which extend far beyond the context of the ritual. This would seem then to be a perfect case of what I've been calling political action.

From one perspective, magical action might seem one of the purest forms of political action, because it can *only* have effects on others in so far as someone hears about it, or otherwise learns that it has happened. Unless you happen to believe that, say, secretly rubbing bits of wood on a man's picture really can cause him to fall madly in love with you, it is clear that such actions can only have effects in so far as word gets around that you have done so. In fact, except perhaps for certain acts of representation themselves (speaking, writing, illustrating . . .) magical action is the only kind that might be said to consist of a null set; it does nothing in the physical context of its enactment, but only in so far as it enters a broader, more political context of narration, discussion, and report.

Surprisingly, to a certain extent, people seemed to actually acknowledge this. Speaking in the abstract, almost everyone said medicine would only affect

you if you believe in it; many added, only if you actually knew that it was being directed against you.[19] Even professional astrologers would often talk this way. Rakoto, for example, used to reassure Claude that one would never be punished for violating a taboo they didn't know about.[20]

But one can only take the analogy of a social theory so far. First of all, such statements were completely contradicted by ordinary practice. Sick people regularly went to astrologers or mediums in order to find out whether they were being bewitched, and who had done it. They did not assume that because they didn't know, they could not have been affected. When someone moved into a new community, people warned them about the local *fady,* and acted as if by doing so, they were doing them a favor. Certainly no one suggested that by doing so, they were placing them in more danger than they would have been had they not known about the taboo.[21]

Secondly, however much the creation of *ody* might have involved a recognition of the social significance of words, representations, and perceptions, their effects—at least, the effects of legitimate *ody*—were not seen as being social at all. Legitimate *ody* acted on hailstorms, iron objects, fire, maybe crocodiles or herds of cattle, but not people. There were really only two categories of medicine seen as having direct effects on other people: witchcraft (which directly harmed its victims) and "love medicine," the term applied to almost any medicine which had a direct effect on other people's actions. Both were considered morally illegitimate.

Finally, once their creators' intentions had been objectified, *ody* were seen as taking on a conscious agency or intelligence of their own, a sort of delegated intentionality. This was called its "spirit," or *lolo.* Under the right conditions, this "spirit" could take on a life and purpose of its own[22]—particularly, if its original owners had abandoned it.

It was Madame Mariel, Betafo's schoolteacher, who first told me the story of the "Beasts of Andrianony" (*ny bibin'Andrianony*). The quarter of Andrianony, she explained, was actually named after a *Vazimba*, an ancient aboriginal creature[23] whose descendants had later intermarried with Betafo's slaves. Andrianony had some very powerful malicious medicine ("with the ancient Malagasy, you see, everyone had their medicine") that he buried to the north of town. When he died and there was no one to inherit it, the medicine transformed itself into living creatures: two red, snakelike monsters that still live underneath the dam. Periodically they still reappear, surrounded by numerous tiny offspring. Always, when they do, it's a token of disaster.

> Mariel: It was—I don't know, three, maybe four years ago—when those creatures last came out and appeared. Near the edge of the water by the spring . . . they were rolling along drinking water when the former *President Fokontany* and his little daughter ran across them, and sure enough, one or two days after that the little girl's sister died.

In this case, it was as if the malicious intentions embodied in the charm became more and more autonomous until they finally took on an entirely independent existence of their own. But even *ody* which had been created for perfectly decent motives could, if abandoned, "turn," becoming evil. This was particularly true of *ody havandra,* hail charms, which were almost always treated as beings with wills and personalities of their own.[24] Often for instance such a charm's spirit (*lolo*) was said to select its guardian by coming to him in a dream. Ratsizafy (himself the guardian of a hail charm) told me the story of one from a nearby village whose keeper had become religious and threw it away. In the end, it turned into evil medicine so devastating that the village had to be abandoned. People still avoid letting children or animals stray too near the ruins.

Lolo is also the word for "ghost,"[25] and I think that's revealing. Forgotten *ody,* like forgotten people, can still have effects. Spectacular cases like the Beasts of Andrianony may be unusual, but communities like Betafo are riddled with ghosts and lost intentions, and this is essential not only to the local theory of history, but to the game of politics itself.

A Village Protected by Trees

Most ancient villages are built on a commanding eminence, visible from miles around. Betafo is not, it's on a relatively low spur covered with greenery. As one approaches from the south, it looks like a small forest, with an occasional roof breaking through the treetops—and from some angles, one can make out the slightly crooked spire of the Protestant church. This in itself can act as a form of protection: bandits or invaders coming from most directions would have little way of knowing an important settlement was there.

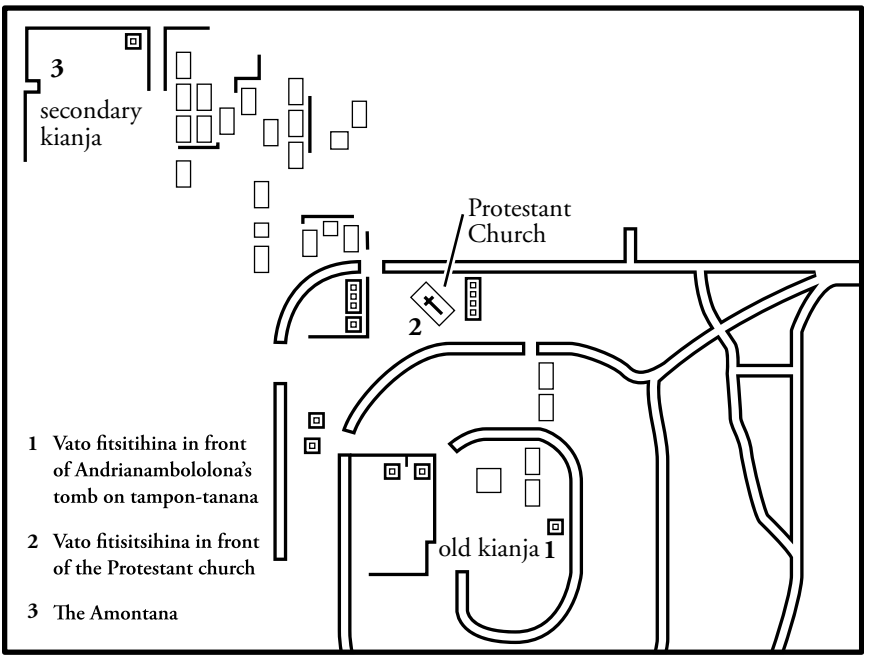
As one approaches from the south, the main sign that one is coming on a settlement is the presence of other forms of protection: that is, the fact that one is continually crossing moats.[26] Some of these are quite dramatic, suddenly interrupting the grassy surface of the hilltop to drop twenty five or thirty feet straight down. There are moats with trees growing in them whose

highest branches do not reach the top. After crossing the second ring, the path winds past Rakotonarivo Auguste's ruined mansion, into a wood overgrown with sisal, huge stands of eucalyptus, fruit trees, and every sort of underbrush, so that even the edges of the moats here are invisible until one is almost on them. The fields are broken by red mudbrick walls, some partly crumbling, some, like those surrounding the mansion, surprisingly pristine. When one finally crosses the last moat to enter *tampon-tanana*, one has the sense of entering an isolated, sheltered place. As in most of this central area of Betafo, trunks, sisal fronds, the ruins of old walls, or foundations of ruined houses block any panoramic vista, so that one proceeds through a succession of closed, sequestered spaces, full of trees.

People in Andrianony, which is still densely crowded with houses and walled courtyards, sometimes refer to *tampon-tanana* as "the village in the fields." But most of its trees are foreign, eucalyptus or pine, planted during reforestation efforts in mid-century. People say before it was largely abandoned in the '30s, it was a town of high walls, tall buildings with magnificent verandahs, like a much grander version of what Andrianony is today. But again, even in Malagasy times there was the same thick grass and sisal and underbrush, the same fruit trees, and a number of Malagasy trees as well, notably trees of the sycamore family called *aviavy* and *amontana.*

In 1990, there was only one ancient *amontana* tree left in Betafo, but it was considered very important—in part because such trees are said only to grow in *andriana* settlements. It stands in a walled enclosure just to the west of Andrianony, as one descends down toward the fields. Chantal's father, who was among other things a practicing astrologer, told me that *amontana* are often placed in a *vintana* ("destiny") opposite to that of the tomb of the local Great Ancestor.[27] The layout of Betafo conforms quite well with this model, if one takes the site of the present Protestant church as its center.

Betafo could be said, then, to have two alternative centers. One would, of course, be *tampon-tanana,* at the center of its three concentric moats, where, against the lip of the east moat, stands the tomb of the *razambe.* In front of this tomb is the cleared space which was once the site of the former *kianja,* a public space for meetings and assemblies. But the enclosure which contains the *amontana* (and a different ancient tomb) is also said to have once been a *kianja.* If we take the astrologer's suggestion and see these two *kianja* as opposed poles, then the mid-point between them would be the area just to the northwest of *tampon-tanana,* west of Avarakady—the exact spot Andriamaharo's



6.1. Trees and stones

family chose where, in 1867, they laid the foundation of Betafo's first Protestant church, and where the church has continued to stand ever since.

From one point of view, then, *tampon-tanana* is the center; from another (perhaps more technically astrological) perspective, it is the area around the church. Significantly, these were the two places in Betafo where there were "stones of imprecation" (*vato fitsitsihina*), places for carrying out ordeals. One, about two feet high, stood immediately in front of the entrance to the church, along the path that lead up to it from the west. (This is the only one that has been used in recent memory; a collective ordeal was held there in 1979. The 1987 ordeal was held not there but in Belanitra.) The other was a smallish standing stone now largely hidden in the grass of the former *kianja* in front of Andrianambololona's tomb. Miadana claimed this one drew on the power of Andrianambololona himself, and was therefore so powerful everyone was afraid to use it; others wondered if it had any *hasina* left in it at all.

While I never found anyone who could draw such systematic connections

between these artifacts, everyone saw them as significant objects, charged—or probably charged—with power of one sort or another. Many people, for example, claimed that the *amontana* tree was not only a mark of nobility, but was also the village's *famato*—a *famato* being a form of medicine that protects a community from thieves. By this they meant that, like the stone, the tree had once been consecrated. Sheep had been sacrificed or other rituals carried out to give it *hasina.* Once *hasina* has been created, it often lingers on. Therefore, if one continued to observe the taboos, Betafo would continue to be protected. Others denied that Betafo ever had a *famato* to protect it, or said there was, but the tree was not it, or that the tree had in fact been given *hasina* for different reasons. But in Betafo, these kinds of arguments were the very stuff of politics.

Buried Ody

Almost as soon as her family moved back to Betafo, Miadana told me, neighbors on *tampon-tanana* started scolding them for using *fanilo*—leafy reeds which country people often use as torches—after dusk. In Betafo, she said, one was not allowed to carry fire after twilight, or to carry a flame across the threshold under any circumstances. Miadana had apologized, and promised never to do it again.

So of course I asked, what was the reason for this taboo? She wasn't really sure, but it had something to do with a *famato,* and perhaps, with the *amontana* tree ("that huge old tree to the west of Andrianony—trees like that are a mark of nobility, you know"). I decided to ask around about it, and Miadana said she would too.

The results surprised both of us. One neighbor who originally scolded them had since died, the other was unavailable, but other *andriana* almost invariably claimed never to have heard of such a taboo. Or . . . to be more precise, everyone did know that, wherever there was a taboo on bringing out fires at twilight, it was always because of a *famato.* Most duly explained that *famato* were a type of protection medicine, typically buried in the ground or attached to some feature of the landscape, that they kept away thieves and bandits (one man added that during the colonial period they were also used to keep out tax collectors and gendarmes), or made stolen animals return home of their own accord. But all denied such a taboo existed in Betafo.

Many denied there had ever been a *famato* in the *amontana*. Others were

more circumspect. Jean Marie, who was also from Andrianony, claimed that there was a *famato,* but it was not the *amontana* but in a stand of very ancient eucalyptus trees that grow not far from it. It is absolutely forbidden, he said, to take an axe to them:

> Jean Marie: Well, as for those: *andriana* settlements, you see, they tend to have lots of taboos. Because here and there there's likely to be some kind of buried object. . . . They're like soldiers posted all around the place, and so the places become taboo.

Take Ratsiraka, he said, the Malagasy president. Wherever he goes, he's always surrounded by soldiers who protect him. Well, with the ancient *andriana*, it was much the same with charms.

Here Jean Marie was clearly evoking the image of the *andriana* Great Ancestor, surrounded by the graves of his "soldiers" who were really slaves. Just as rulers surround themselves with soldiers—thus making themselves rulers by their ability to command others—so they used to surround themselves with *ody.* In a way, *ody* were to objects what soldiers or slaves were to people: they had a will and intelligence of their own, they were capable of acting autonomously, but their will was subordinated to that of their owners. *Tampon-tanana* remains riddled with buried charms, which, like the buried soldiers, are also extensions of their former inhabitants' intentions.

Many people in Belanitra and Anosy, for example, insisted that they do not bring onions or garlic into their villages because of two *ody* from former times (named Ramahavalia and Rafantaka) that used to protect them against witches. The *ody* were gone—at best, some suggested they might be buried somewhere, in the fields or the remains of abandoned houses—but it was felt wise to keep up the taboos. I told Jean Marie about them too. He hadn't heard of this, but he said that in Betafo there was a similar custom because of fire medicine (*ody afo*). Many of the oldest houses in Betafo used to have *ody* that would prevent them from burning, so that even if one put a candle to the roof, the thatch would suddenly become damp and wouldn't light. Those charms also tabooed onions and garlic, and while they themselves are gone, people who live in those houses keep up the taboos.

We were discussing this at Miadana's, whose mother-in-law Elizabeth was staying over for the weekend. "So what about carrying torches outside the house?" asked Elizabeth. "Because here on *tampon-tanana,* that's definitely taboo."

Well, you know how it is with *lolo,* said Jean Marie . . .

> Jean Marie: That is, if there's a place where a lot of ancestors used to live, then almost always, they cannot bring themselves to abandon it. They won't be visible to the eye, but still, they'll linger. *Lolo,* however, are always going to be afraid of fire. Once the sun sets, you can't carry a fire outside your house. Once the sun begins to turn red, you have to put them out, because once the sun is red the *lolo* begin to come up to the places where they used to live. But they're not seen by the eye . . .

. . . and all of a sudden everyone was talking about ghosts. When ghosts see infant children, continued Jean Marie, they want to play with them; unlike adults, though, infants can see the ghosts and that's why after dusk, if you let them outside, they'll often start crying for no apparent reason. Elizabeth said she remembered when she and her sister used to come home in the evening they'd often see a person with white hair lurking in the window—you could just barely make it out, and they'd all gather around trying to see her. To this day, said Jean Marie, people often see apparitions in the area just south of the ruined mansion: either a man in a black three-piece suit, or three young women. You'll be sitting there eating lunch, after a morning in the fields, and there they'd be, off in the distance walking towards you on the path. You look again, they're gone. . . .

Everyone was having so much fun swapping ghost stories that I didn't want to interrupt them, but the conversation puzzled me. You don't light fires so as not to scare away the ghosts? Really? Everyone else insisted that normal people did everything in their power to keep ghosts distant. Did Jean Marie mean to imply there was no difference between the ghosts (*lolo*) that scare children in the night, and the "ghosts" (*lolo*) that power medicine? It didn't seem impossible, since nineteenth-century texts, which referred to the latter sort of spirits as *Ranakandriana*, were full of similar comments on how they can only be glimpsed from the corner of one's eye, and disappear if one lights a torch or stares directly at them. On the other hand, Jean Marie had a rather impetuous rhetorical style; perhaps he'd just gotten carried off by his own momentum.

So next I went around asking, was it ghosts then that lay behind the power of the *famato*? No one claimed to know. Such things were inherently mysterious. One woman from Belanitra did tell me in her mother's village, there was, indeed, a ghost that protected the village—if intruders tried to come in at night, it would suddenly loom up before them like a gigantic black Senegalese soldier and frighten them away. For this reason it was taboo there to carry fires outside the house, but she claimed never to have heard of such a

taboo in Betafo, and when I mentioned her story to others, the main reaction was amusement: Good story. Who knows? Maybe it's even true.

The single most famous tree in the region west of the capital, probably, was the huge old *amontana* that stood in the main square in the town Arivonimamo, near the taxi station—the mark that Arivonimamo was once a royal capital. It was widely believed to have sprung from the remains of a human body. According to the most common version in Betafo, from the body of a young boy, the illegitimate son of a slave woman and her *andriana* master, who was smuggled away from his place of birth and secretly killed there to avoid scandal. No such rumors surrounded the *amontana* in Betafo. But stories and images like this were common currency throughout rural Imerina. *Andriana* were surrounded by hidden charms, which protect them and their property; unmaintained, their locations forgotten, such hidden *ody* might retain their benevolent power or they might "turn," becoming malevolent charms or transforming themselves into malevolent animals. *Andriana* ancestors are surrounded by the buried bodies of their guardian slaves. Some trees are *ody* that protect the community, others, the bodies of murdered slaves.

There were other stories about dead people turning into trees. The most famous by far was about a pair of young lovers from Antsirabe, in the far south of Imerina, whose parents would not let them marry. They ended up committing suicide by tying themselves together and throwing themselves into a pool. Later, two trees sprang from the spot, and grew up coiled around each other so tightly that no one could tell where one stopped and the other started (Callet 1908:1008–1016). Rainibe told me exactly the same story about two young lovers from around Betafo: one descended from Andrianamboninolona, the other, from the Zanak'Andriamasoandro who lived immediately to the west. They climbed one of the peaks of Ambohidraidimby, and threw themselves into a pool. Two trees grew from the spot. Sometime later they appeared to one of their parents in a dream to reveal what had happened. One man heard the story and didn't believe it, so he decided to climb the mountain and put an ax to one—the moment the blade broke its bark, blood started flowing from it.

Some trees were downright dangerous. Once, in the marketplace in Arivonimamo, one man told me the story of a child who climbed a tree to steal a bird's nest, and ended up temporarily unable to use his hands.

François: There are *Vazimba* spirits, and there are tree spirits [*lolon-kazo*]. There are trees people worship, because they have spirits in them. Even that *amontana* over there [near the taxi station]: there's a spirit in it. I will tell you a true story so you can understand.

There was a child, half-grown, around the age of nine. And . . . do you know what *fody* are?

David: The bird?

François: They make nests in the spring, when they lay their eggs. Children like to play with the nests. And there's a *rotra* tree—a huge *rotra*—and below it, a hole with very ancient brickwork. And there are spirits there.

The child saw the *fody*'s nest and climbed up to take it. He climbed up, reached out, and then this is what his hand did: [he shakes his hand spasmodically]. Couldn't use it. It shook like this [he does it again].

The family took him to one curer after another, but to no avail. Finally, they took him to a particularly skillful *Zanadrano* [a medium]. He invoked his spirits, stared silently into a mirror, then revealed to the child's parents what he saw. He said:

François: "There is a big tree here. I don't know its name. And around it," he said, "it's thick with greenery."

(And that was really true, because there were crops growing all around the tree. That's how I knew that "he really knows what he's doing, this *Zanadrano* looking in the mirror here.")

And he said: "His hand seized a *fody*'s nest, and it irritated the spirit inside the tree: that's why he can't use his hand any more. There was a shade in there, and he encountered it, and that's why his hand doesn't move." So then he called on the tree's spirits, to question them. He listened to what they said, then we all heard him say: "Who are you, and what are you tormenting this child so? Whose ancestors are you, anyway?" And then they spoke, saying, "We are soldiers, soldiers that surround that place."

They were the souls of soldiers long ago.

Then the *Zanadrano* said: "Release the boy so he can go to school, because there's no justification for this." But this is what he said to us: "Go buy peppermint candies, twelve of them. But don't give any food to these evil spirits [*lolo ratsy*]. Offer them to the Andriambe.[28] There's a standing stone there in Ambohimanarina which is called Andriambelomasina. Just you, the father of the child, go, and don't bring anyone else, and say 'Here, oh grandfather, this child has been tormented. Here are peppermints, so let him now be free of it.'"

After the peppermints had been brought to the standing stone, that was all: the child has been free of it ever since.

In some places, soldiers' ghosts are bound to protect the town; in others, they prey on those who sully the places where they live.

Another medium told me that there were three kinds of *lolo:* ghosts;

Vazimba (the spirits of those lost or forgotten), and *lolon-kazo,* "the ghosts of trees." The latter made a neat circle, since charms are themselves made up of chunks of wood (*tapa-kazo,* literally "pieces of trees"). It's the spirit in the tree that ends up powering the charm. But this was one woman's speculation. In fact, the circles didn't close—even those who liked to speculate never framed things precisely the same way. What there were, however, were stories, wonder stories that, though they were always attached to specific locations, tended to recycle the same basic themes in endless meandering variations.

These themes, however, bear repeating:

1. The people of old knew how to make other people or things extensions of their own wills, intentions, or desires. Hence their intentions still endure, lodged in aspects of the landscape: some hidden (buried *ody*), some visible (rocks and trees).
2. Once detached, however, such intentions acquired a potential autonomy; once charged with *hasina*, trees, rocks, and *ody* resemble slaves and soldiers:[29] they were capable of acting independently, even if for the moment they did not.
3. Anything with the power of autonomous action also had the capacity to "turn," to transform, to change in either form or disposition. This was particularly likely to happen after its creator died. Medicine created to protect a village might continue to protect it, or it might turn around completely and wreak havoc, or behave like a petulant ancestor punishing those who did not abide by their taboos.

A corollary is that, in rural Imerina, all agency operative in the world was human agency. This was not a world dominated by "nature spirits."[30] To the contrary: if an object—a rock, a tree—had power, it was ultimately an extension of the purposes of some human being. It might be someone long since dead: an ancestor, a nameless ghost. More likely, it might be many people: the elders who dedicated standing stones, or the generations of *andriana* who sacrificed sheep to give power to the tree that protects the village.

This, I think, is the real meaning of the term *lolo.* It refers to ghostly, nameless, abstract intentions or desires, whether it be the abstract will to dominate others inherent in powerful love medicine, or the desires of the dead to see their old homes and play once again with children. Like most

Malagasy spiritual forces—*lolo* are invisible beings, formless and abstract. Earlier I made the argument that it is this very invisibility and lack of definition that can make them vehicles of power.[31] One can take this even further. Another word for spirits of the dead is *fanahy,* "souls"; but *fanahy* is also the word for "character," the inner, invisible aspect of the person that is also the seat of intentionality, desire, and the will.[32] The invisibility of these ghosts in fact is entirely appropriate to beings that are really expressions of inner states—vestiges of ancient intentions or desires which linger even after the physical, visible person of those who felt them has long since turned to dust.

Knowledge and Power

Soldiers and slaves, of course, were not morally neutral images. In rural Imerina, there was felt to be something fundamentally wrong about reducing one person to the vehicle of another's will. In this light, it only makes sense that people would be reluctant to claim authority by identifying themselves with the aims and purposes of the dead. Doing so would be trying to win over others by claiming to be, oneself, the vehicle of another person's will. Politics was not a matter of rallying followers around a cause, or even, of claiming to represent group interests. It is this, especially, which contributes to the impression that there is nothing here we would normally think of as a political domain.

It also created a certain rupture between the past and present. Let me illustrate this by returning to the typology of narratives mapped out in part 1. Stories of suspense, I said, are structured around an intentional project of action. In order for such a story to hold one's interest, one has to be able to identify with the protagonists, to care about their aims and fears. Stories of mystery or reversal do not require this kind of sympathetic identification because they are structured around knowledge. One reason these latter two cropped up so much more often in conversation in Imerina was that local authority was not a matter of identifying oneself with past intentions, it was a matter of knowing about them. Since intentions can break off and take on a power of their own, most stories told in a political context are not meant to marshal sympathy, but rather to prove that they really did exist; to resolve mysteries or warn of the possibility of being surprised by unexpected dangers.[33]

The Beasts of Andrianony were originally malevolent medicine: instruments of violence and a tool of politics. In the same way, the spirits of "slaves" and "soldiers," or buried *ody,* became figures for the way politics was conducted

in the past: coercion, bending of others to one's will, everything which made the ancients grand, and somewhat wicked. Still, the traces of these intentions remain to haunt those of the present day, mixed with much more benevolent intentions. The purposes of the great men of the past are indeed seen to shape the life of people in the present, but only indirectly. The problem is to sort them out.

Hence the peculiar sort of capital *tampon-tanana* Betafo had become. Not many dared to live there. Like most such ancient settlements in Imerina, it had become largely a place of tombs and ruins, emptied of living people by the very force of the history that lay buried underneath it. Most of its inhabitants left after the fire of 1931, a catastrophe many said to have been inflicted by ancestors angry that they hadn't been properly remembered. As people kept reminding me, it's very difficult to live in such a place. There are endless restrictions; it is hard to be sure precisely what's allowed; terrible vengeance awaits those who make mistakes. Many have had their lives destroyed by doing so. The center was like a minefield; a mosaic of sequestered spaces, riddled with charged objects—tombs, trees, hidden medicine—each defining fields of force and danger that may or may not be real; full of ancient intentions and desires that live on in partial, transformed or fragmentary form. As one moved outward from the ruined center, history became less dense, and living inhabitants more numerous, but one was never entirely free of it.

Much of the political struggle that did take place, on a day to day level, was over who could impose their interpretation of what these ghostly powers were, and especially, what restrictions one had to observe as a result. This was certainly what Miadana's neighbors did when they scolded her about the local *fady.* True, in doing so one might also say they were, to a degree, identifying themselves with ancestral purposes: the ancestors had created a *famato* to protect the village; by informing newcomers of its *fady,* they were maintaining it. But it was presented as an issue of knowledge, which others could deny on those grounds. No one debated whether this was a legitimate project; what one debated was whether or not there was really a *famato,* and whether that was really its taboo. It would have been exactly the same had the taboo been caused by an angry ghost.

If no two individuals agreed entirely about the local *fady,* then, this was because this was one of the principle ways of establishing authority. Members of the same families would at least have roughly the same list, and by trying to impose their view on others, they were trying to extend a variation of ancestral

authority onto wider circles beyond their immediate family, if by claims to knowledge rather than of ancestry. In the end, though, it came down to much the same thing: telling others what they couldn't do.

Part 3: The Conduct of Politics, or, Stories about People

Politics, of course, is not simply restricted to arguments about the past. The reason it made sense to start with these examples was that these provide an illustration of the way that the game of politics is played more generally. The trick is to identify oneself with potentially harmful, even coercive, forms of power without at the same time becoming the sort of person willing to do harm to others—which would, of course, make one entirely reprehensible creature who could never be the holder of legitimate ancestral authority. Claiming knowledge of lost *ody* or powerful features of the landscape was perhaps the safest way to do so, since it made one more of an ancestral figure, not less. No one, however, limited it to that.

Many took advantage of the ambiguity of taboos. Most taboos were fairly stereotyped—there was a fairly restricted list of animals and plants that were often the object of *fady* (onions, pigs, goats, snails, *sorohitra* birds . . .) and others (tomatoes, beef, beans . . .) that almost never were. This ensures a constant level of uncertainty. If your companion suddenly refuses to eat the pork you've brought for lunch, and claims it is because of an ancestral prohibition, how do you know that she is really telling the truth? How do you know it isn't because she's carrying love medicine, or something worse?

Some people seemed fairly clearly to be playing with such ambiguities. Take Irina's family. Irina told me that all Betafo's *andriana* were forbidden, by ancestral taboo, to eat *anantsinahy*—a rather bland leafy vegetable often eaten with one's rice. Everyone else I talked to in Betafo denied this. But in almost every case, they also remarked: normally, if someone is not allowed to eat *anantsinahy,* that's because they're playing around with lightning medicine (*ody varatra*). Now, lightning medicine is very dubious stuff because it is not used to protect people against lightning, it's used to cast it. It's basically a form of witchcraft. One cannot know for sure; one obvious interpretation is that Irina wanted to ensure that the suspicion that her family might, just possibly, have such powers at least existed in other people's minds—and that, for this reason, it might not be such a good idea to pick a fight with them.

This was not an isolated case. Politics, in Betafo, was full of such suggestive

ambiguities. I can't really say whether Irina or other members of her family were playing such games consciously in this case, but the point is that it doesn't really matter. Once the atmosphere becomes seeded with such possibilities, everyone is on some level aware that their gestures are always open to interpretation.

Medicine and the Range of Public Personae

In chapter 3, I argued that public personae are largely defined by capacities: abilities, knowledge, skills. Again, the example of Irina: if one were to frame one's suspicions, one would not say she "has lightning medicine"—the presence or absence of some physical object is not the issue—but that she "knows how to use it." What they are really talking about is a capacity based on arcane knowledge. This, however, is generally hidden knowledge—its hiddenness is proof of power—and thus one can rarely be entirely sure about such matters. One defines others, then, partly in terms of what they *might* know how to do.

It was rare to see a fist fight. When one did, occasionally, occur, it was almost between close relatives: two brothers, usually, maybe sometimes cousins. Why was that, I would occasionally ask. The response was immediate, a matter of common sense: who would be such an idiot as to fight a stranger? If it's someone you don't really know, how can you be sure they don't know how to throw lightning, drive you insane, or wither your rice crop at a single blow? It was only with one's family one could be relatively sure of their capacities.

Within a small community like Betafo, political action consisted largely of the manipulation of impressions. About oneself, one had to strike a delicate balance between power and authority. No one wanted to give the impression they were totally without resources. It is best to at least raise the possibility that one might have hidden powers, if only to intimidate others who might otherwise be inclined to hurt you. On the other hand, the more you are seen as entangled in medicine, the less you can hope to stake a place as *Ray amandReny*, as a respectable elder and representative of the ancestors. At stake, in the end, is both one's communal authority—one's ability to speak, if not as an elder, then as someone on the way to becoming one—and, ultimately, one's reputation as a fundamentally decent human being. If one strays too far, one ends up a reputation as a witch, a person so depraved they ought to be excluded from the moral community entirely.

One could in fact draw out a rough continuum of types, ranging from

bona fide elders on the one side to recognized witches on the other. If the first represents the greatest possible respectability and social authority, the other represents the greatest reputation for access to means of coercive or aggressive power. Let me describe four (somewhat idealized) positions along this imaginary line, four types of political personae, each defined largely in terms of characteristic forms of knowledge and ability.

Elders

Knowledge alone cannot make one a true *Ray amandReny*. One must be an elderly head of a large local family—or even better, a recently deceased one. But when talking about those who definitely have achieved this status, people would almost inevitably make a great point of their mastery of certain forms of knowledge, particularly those considered archetypically "Malagasy."

The most obvious of these was knowledge of the past, of ancestral custom and oral history (*lovan-tsofina*) which elders were always assumed to have. But there were certain skills that were considered equally ancestral: first and foremost, the ability to use traditional rhetoric (*mikabary*), which drew on ancestral, proverbial wisdom. This is not to say an inarticulate man cannot hope to be considered an elder. But if a prominent old man was also able to speak well, and regularly gave speeches at *famadihana* or wedding negotiations, people would always remark on it. Another was astrological knowledge. Often I would hear young people boast that their family never had to rely on professional astrologers, because their grandmother or grandfather knew how—but almost always they would also add that this was not knowledge got through study, but which had been "given by God," and that they used it only for their families, never to get money.

Oratory and astrology were considered essentially male forms of knowledge, though some women had them; there were also skills seen as essentially female which did add to the prestige of older women in a parallel way, such as midwifery (*fampivelonana*), and knowledge of herbs for common ailments, which mothers often passed on to their daughters. I knew of two prominent men in Betafo, too, whose mothers had trained them as midwives, and no one suggested their expertise in women's lore did anything but enhance their status as elders—though it did not seem to be considered quite as impressive as, say, being accomplished orator would have been.

Biblical knowledge, I found, used to be considered entirely appropriate to the public role of elder as well, but my impression was that for several decades

the importance of the church in public affairs had been declining. When I was in Betafo, there had been no full-time pastor for several years, and church affairs, both Catholic and Protestant, were largely dominated by older women.[34]

Elders' authority was not entirely based on knowledge; but knowledge was its essential medium. One did not have to be skilled in formal rhetoric to admonish the young; but it made admonition much more effective. One did not need any knowledge at all to curse one's descendants; but people very rarely cursed their descendants. What they did constantly was argue about *fady* others had imposed by cursing. By being translated into a matter of knowledge, ancestral authority became more indirect, but in a way, it became even more legitimate, since it was entirely divorced from individual intentions.

The forms of knowledge considered most diametrically opposed to that of elders was knowledge of medicine; to suggest that someone was "playing with medicine" (*milalao ody*)—particularly, anything that wasn't obviously a harmless form of protection—cast any claims they might make to be an elder seriously in doubt. It was in fact especially in this context that the religious terms, in which all *ody* were morally tainted, was usually trotted out. One reason there were so few genuine elders was that there was almost no one around who was not at least suspected of having something to do with medicine.

Astrologers (*mpanandro*)

Professional astrologers were by far the most respectable practitioners of medicine (*mpomasy*). The vast majority were male. The core of their art—calculating "destinies," determining the ideal locations for new tombs and houses, finding the proper days for ceremonies—was, as I've said, considered appropriate for the most respectable of elders. What set professional astrologers apart, however (apart from the fact that they charged for their services), was that they were also dealt in medicine: they diagnosed and cured the effects of witchcraft, provided protection medicine, and "adjusted destinies" (*manamboatra vintana*), which could mean anything from assuring the success a business venture to making a married couple more compatible. If a couple was quarreling, for instance, the astrologer might provide a certain set of beads, telling them to bathe together in water in which the bead had been placed at every quarter moon, or the scrapings of certain bits of wood to be eaten or rubbed on the body mixed with honey or castor oil.[35]

Astrologers tended to develop local clienteles. One common synonym for *mpomasy* was *mpitaiza olona,* one who "nurses," "fosters," or "cares for" other

people, and any notable astrologer would have a number of regular clients said to be their "fosterlings" (*olona taizany*). For some, the astrologer would become a kind of general mentor, providing guidance, help, and medicine for every aspect of their lives. The paternalistic idiom though was not limited to regular clients: even when one simply came to help plan a ritual, or because one's child was ill, one would always address an astrologer as *dada,* "father," and use the same forms of address one would when speaking to one's parents, or addressing an ancestor. It was an extremely hierarchical relationship. Astrologers also resembled ancestral figures in their ability to impose taboos. When they provided medicine, for curing or protection, there were almost always *fady* to be observed. Among their clients, too, astrologers were treated as the final authorities in all matters of taboo.

In almost every way, astrologers tried to wrap their practice up in a cloak of ancestral legitimacy. Like mediums, most astrologers had some spirit or spirits that provided advice and assistance in their work, but where mediums would appeal to ancient kings, the astrologers I knew almost always claimed theirs were their own distant ancestors. Both Ratsizafy and his greatest rival, Dada Leva from the nearby village of Kianja, claimed to be descendants from the ancient Betsileo king Andriamanalina, and both claimed a more recent ancestor, one of that king's many sons and grandsons, continued to appear in dreams and visions to help them in their curing.[36] Astrologers were among the only people, in fact, who claimed to gain concrete powers from their ancestors, and by doing so many were able to boast of abilities no one else would have dared to openly admit to.[37]

Of all public figures in a rural community, they were also the ones who most resembled Western politicians. If there were several astrologers in the same community, they were almost always rivals; their clienteles would then resemble political factions. Since curers were expected not only to cure the effects of witchcraft but also to identify the witch, astrologers could have an enormous influence on people's attitudes toward one another.

Here, though, lie an astrologer's greatest vulnerability. Because everyone assumed that knowledge cuts both ways. If you know how to prevent hailstorms, then you must also know how to bring them down. If you know how to cure a disease, then you must also know how to inflict it. As a result, in cases of witchcraft, astrologers—whatever their veneer of respectability—were obvious suspects. Admittedly, astrologers could have headed this off if (like Western doctors) had they made a rule of never saying anything bad about each other,

but this they definitively did not do. Mention the name of one curer to another, and the typical response ranged from noncommittal shrugs to accusations of fraud, incompetence, witchcraft, or some combination of the three.

Take Ratsizafy. He was in every way a venerable figure. True, he was of *mainty* descent, but he was extremely rich, extremely old (87 when I knew him, though many believed him to be at least 100), and his skill was renowned as far as the capital. His clients, and almost all Betafo's black people, referred to him not by name, but as "the Ingahibe," a title of respect reserved only for genuine elders. So did those *andriana* who were among his clients. But most *andriana* did not accept him as an elder of any sort. It was not simply his mainty descent (since there were other *mainty*, like Ingahirainy, whose status no one challenged): it was more because Ratsizafy was seen as the political leader of the *mainty* of Betafo, the leader of a faction. Therefore, if Ratsizafy's name were mentioned, many would immediately launch into moralistic condemnations of his use of beads and infusions of honey and bits of wood—the kind of pious Christian discourse no one ever invoked except against those they disapproved of for other reasons.

Many suggested darker things. One story had it that in his youth, Ratsizafy and another *mpomasy* used to travel in the newly colonized lands out west—a land full of nouveau riches, cattle, and easy money. At each new town, his companion would randomly bewitch people, the next day, Ratsizafy would show up and cure them. Then they split the profits fifty-fifty. Most emphasized this was a long time ago, but some *andriana* willing to suggest he was still capable of witchcraft. One went so far as to suggest he had acquired his latest wife by poisoning her husband (a former client) and slipping her love medicine—an accusation so extreme that I suspect very few would have given it much credit, but one which shows just how ugly some of the rumors surrounding such venerable figures can be.

Astrologers then were essentially respectable figures, but unlike true *Ray amandReny*, it was rare to find one who was universally respected. But this too was part of what made them so resemble politicians: they had both supporters and detractors, a loyal following, and others who would publicly denounce them.

People Who Have *Vazimba*

I have already mentioned that professional curers tend to fall into two broad categories: astrologers and mediums (*Zanadrano*.) Now, while in

Arivonimamo or other roadside towns of comparable size, there were usually quite a number of publicly recognized mediums; rural mediums were more secretive. There were two men in Betafo, for instance, who almost everyone knew practiced as *Zanadrano*, but neither would admit they did to me.

An astrologer, of course, would never be able to deny their practice, but rural mediums usually took patients from outside their communities. They did not develop local clienteles. Often, they denied having a practice even to their neighbors. Their neighbors, in turn, would rarely describe them as mediums. Instead, they would say they "had a *Vazimba*"—a *Vazimba* being a kind of mysterious spirit which lurked in watery places, an anonymous, dangerous ghost. True, if one pursued the matter ("And what does he do with this Vazimba?"), they would usually go on to explain that it gave them access to a larger world of invisible forces, including the royal spirits normally invoked by mediums, and that, yes, they did use those spirits to cure the sick. But this was always treated as secondary.

While the mediums I knew in town all made a great point of emphasizing that the royal spirits would never allow them to harm anyone, even if to take revenge for witchcraft, *Vazimba* were not believed to be so fastidious. To say a man had a *Vazimba*, then, was to say he was a potentially very dangerous man.

By being so coy about what they did, in public, such men seemed to play a very self-conscious game of manipulating impressions, to come as near as they could to suggesting they had deadly powers without therefore becoming entirely reprehensible. Or, it would probably be better to say the secrecy had a double effect. As with *ody,* the act of hiding something was itself a way of saying it had power; in a sense, their coyness created the very thing that it disguised.

Early on I was introduced to a man named Ramena, sometimes said to be the chief man of his village of Ambaribe. A man in his fifties, Ramena was a devout Catholic; he had been the local catechist for over a decade.[38] His house, well-appointed by local standards, was full of Catholic paraphernalia: the walls were full of portraits of saints and bishops cut from magazines; the tables, of little plaster images and leather-bound Psalters.

The first time I talked to him, Ramena professed nothing but disdain for *mpomasy*, especially Ratsizafy, with all his elaborate apparatus of beads and woods and bottles of earth taken from royal tombs. Much of their practice, he said, was simple fraud, playing on people's gullible superstition (*finoampoana*). For example, he made a point of denying the concept of *sisika,* that

witches were capable of inserting tiny objects in the bodies of their victims, let alone that there were curers who could suck them out. It was all done with sleight of hand. He was particularly vehement on the subject of taboos. He took the position that there is no such thing as ancestral taboos, that all taboos derive from curers (*mpomasy*) and their medicine. For this reason, he said, he totally rejected them. He and his wife did keep a hail charm of sorts, he explained—it protects the fields surrounding Ambaribe—but this was not actually an *ody,* it was a simple herb, *fanilo,* that they would set on fire when hailstorms threatened. It was remarkably effective, but there were no taboos attached to it at all. No taboos of any sort observed by him and his fellow Catholics in the southwestern part of the territory.

As others quickly pointed out to me, this latter wasn't true. And it seems obvious that the tone of Ramena's discourse had a lot to do with the fact that the only foreigners he'd ever met before were Catholic priests. But there was more to it than that. Each conversation I had with him, in fact, took a similar course: he would start by stoutly denying he would have anything to do with heathen practices, then slowly start introducing hints that this was not entirely the case. Actually, he *was* in communication with a spirit—not one of those *mpomasy* spirits, mind you, but an angelic figure dressed in white who would visit him in his dreams and teach him hymns and sacred music. (Much of the music played at the local church was originally composed by it.) He did know how to cure certain maladies. It had all started when his mother taught him her skills as a midwife. Once he began delivering babies, he found he had other skills as well—though, he hastened to insist, he only used herbal remedies (*raokandro*), and absolutely never chunks of wood, or any of that *mpomasy* stuff like smearing people with earth and honey and imposing taboos. His particular specialty, in fact, was curing a condition called *ambalavelona*, caused by possession by an evil ghost. Such was his fame that patients flocked to him, sometimes, from hundreds of kilometers away.[39]

The first time I talked to him, Ramena struck me as a refreshingly open and likable person—full of hearty good humor. I couldn't understand why my companions—both Parson and Chantal, neither of whom had ever met the man before—seemed so reluctant to share my enthusiasm. Doesn't he seem like a nice man, I asked. "Well, he knows how to talk well," replied Chantal. Parson too seems to have decided from the start that the man was hiding something. He was a bit *too* easy-going. It was forced. And friends from Betafo quickly confirmed there was good reason to be suspicious. Ramena, they said? Have you

noticed how whenever you see him, he's always wearing something red? Even if he's got on a green or yellow overshirt, he'll have a red shirt underneath, and red pants. Why? Well, *Vazimba* like the color red. He has a *Vazimba*. Why else would a Malagasy dare to wear red clothing in the summertime, when there's a lightning storm every night and everyone knows red things attract lightning?

> Armand: With him there's always got to be something red. Especially in the summer—when there's lightning. Then it's all really *red:* whether his hat, his clothes, his pants—red! The bucket he takes into his house: red. Plates: red. Everything that's made of plastic: all red. You can't tell me he just does that because he's a curer—it's *Vazimba* who like that sort of thing!
> Parson: So probably he really does have a *Vazimba*, after all.
> Armand: He definitely does! Not "probably he really does"—he's got one! That water down there, there's a *Vazimba* in it.
> David: *Vazimba* like the color red then?
> Armand: *Vazimba* like red things. If there's a place in the fields where there's a *Vazimba*, usually there'll be red fish there, or a red crab.
>
> Even his wife he makes wear red.
>
> Parson: According to what Ramena himself said, though, there's just this tall, white figure who comes to him in his dreams, who teaches him hymns, explains what sorts of medicine to use . . .
> Armand: I wouldn't know about that.
>
> But you know, from a strictly social point of view, all this is just his way of pushing people around. There's hardly anyone dares get in a fight with him. Hardly anyone. Nobody dares fight with him. I'm thinking of even the church funds, which he stole, and no one said a word. He pocketed the money from the Firaisana—nobody tried to get it back. No one had the nerve to.

Bear in mind here the unusual makeup of the village of Ambaribe. In the late '80s, the vast majority of its households were headed by the descendants of a single man named Rasaona. For most of his life, Rasaona had been Ramena's rival for prominence in the southwest. He had been president of the *fokontany*[40] for decades, eventually rising to president of the Firaisana (Canton). In 1990, six years after his death, eight of his eleven children were still living in Ambaribe. All three of Ramena's children, on the other hand, had moved away. He didn't really have followers there—neither family nor clientele. However, he had been the effective head of the church for decades; he was old and quite wealthy, even apart from delivering babies and keeping the local hail medicine. Even some of Rasaona's children would begrudgingly refer to him as the "chief man" (*loholona*) of Ambaribe—in so far as there was one—and certainly none of them dared express open antipathy, or openly speak about his *Vazimba*. Rasaona himself I was told had been the last person who had publicly opposed him; since Rasoana died, "no one dares fight with him" (*tsy misy sahy miady aminy*).

Here too, though, there was a play of factions. Ramena might not have had a regular clientele around Betafo, but he did have skill in astrology—he, too, claimed it was something that had come to him spontaneously, without study—and while he did not practice professionally, he was often asked to help dedicate houses, or organize rituals, by *andriana* from Antsahavory, Antanety, and Ambohimanjaka. Rasaona's descendants—that is, almost all his fellow Catholics in Ambaribe—never went to Ramena; they made a point of always hiring Ratsizafy. When Rasaona's children held a *famadihana* in Ambaribe in the winter of 1989, Ramena was hardly to be seen; it was Ratsizafy who led the procession. When Irina's family held their *famadihana* in Antanety a month later, Ramena himself was one of the two astrologers.

There was a reason, then, for Ramena's barbs about Ratsizafy. Ratsizafy, on the other hand, made no bones about his opinion of Ramena.

Everyone agreed that Ramena had a *Vazimba*, but many said they weren't sure what he did with it. Others told me flat out that he was a secret *Zanadrano*.[41] But Ratsizafy, and all the black people I spoke to in Betafo—almost all of whom considered themselves loyal to Ratsizafy—would not even admit he was a legitimate curer. Once, for instance, I mentioned Ramena and his *Vazimba* to Armand's younger brother Germain. He seems to use it in curing, I said, but I'm not sure exactly how.

> Germain: But *Vazimba*, you know: *Vazimba* don't cure people. What they do is attack them.
> David: But they say he's cured victims of *ambalavelona.*
> Germain: So how do you think he's able to cure them, then? Because it's something he did himself. If it wasn't he who induced it, he wouldn't be able to get rid of it. It's just a way of making money. And that, he does know how to do . . .

In other words, he was in the same business as, rumor had it, Ratsizafy had once been: making people sick to be able to collect the money for curing them. It was common knowledge that anyone who inflicted *ambalavelona* should be able to remove it.

Here is Ratsizafy's son Noely:

> David: And what about Ramena—does he cure people? Because he's supposed to have a *Vazimba.*
> Noely: Ramena? Well, he does know how to work evil. If it's doing evil, he can hit the target. But if it's a matter of doing good things, like we do here, he can't pull it off. It's evil medicine we're talking about in his case.

> David: Then he really is a sorceror [*mpamorika*]?
> Noely: He's a sorceror, a witch. Take those people who were holding the *famadhina* at Ambaribe—he tried to attack them, but he failed. We'd made such effective protection he was at a loss for what to do. But he definitely did try to attack the participants. He took little *ody,* bits of grass on which he'd smeared medicine, and placed them all around the area. Things which would make you collapse if you stepped over them. He was aiming for the sponsors of the ritual or the astrologer, and if it had worked, they'd have fainted, and then right away there'd be a wound there where it had touched them . . . then he'd only cure it, only remove the *ody,* if they gave him lots of money. Because that's what he does: he makes his living by getting money that way.

In a social world dominated by an ethos of non-confrontation, a man with hidden powers can go far in taking personal advantage, even—if Armand is to be believed—to the point of looting church funds, without a word being pronounced in public. Ramena's case reminds one of nothing so much as James Scott's "Haji Broom" (1985:13–27), miserly landlord of the Malaysian village of Sedaka: in private, no one tired of telling stories of his outrageous stinginess and abuse of power, still, no one dared say anything to his face. The difference is that in Haji Broom's case, the fear was ultimately the effect of an elaborate apparatus of state coercion: Haji Broom had power over others because of his wealth, his wealth was guaranteed by laws of property; laws of property were enforced by armed police. In Betafo this entire apparatus was lacking. Instead, the fear emanated from Ramena's own manipulation of impressions: his skill at political action, at acting in ways calculated to give rise to an endless circulation of stories, endless speculation about what he was capable of. His opponents were quite explicit about this: when I mentioned the red clothes or hail medicine to Noely, his first reaction was to say, "Oh, that's just something he does to frighten people" (*zavatra atahoran'olona fotsiny izany*). But it was certainly effective. As a result, one can also say that Ramena had power—political power in the sense in which I've defined it—because the effect of these manipulations was precisely to prevent others from speaking and acting in response. What he gave up by doing so, though, was the possibility of ever becoming a truly respected *Ray amandReny*, of being loved and trusted by his neighbors, or even, really, of having them consider him a basically decent human being.

Since Ramena had no descendants in Ambaribe, one might imagine his was an approach resorted to mainly by those who had no chance of ever being considered elders anyway. This is not necessarily so. In a small settlement of three houses to the northeast of Betafo lived a man named Rainibe,

mainty, about sixty years old, who had had eleven children and managed to keep quite a large number of them around him. The settlement, called Anjakalambo, was entirely made up of his descendants. Rainibe too had a *Vazimba*. The *Vazimba* lived in a spring in a nearby rice field; while he publicly denied everything (sometimes he would even deny having a practice as a curer), every night when there was a new moon one could hear the sound of drums and singing as he and his family gathered around the spring to give it *hasina.* As with Ramena, it was not a particularly subtle game, but a very effective one. Of Rainibe too I heard the exact same comments: "No one dares fight with him." If he diverts much of the water from neighbor's fields to his own—which he has been known to do—neighbors try to look the other way; if ownership of a field is contested, best forget about the matter. On the other hand, despite his age and progeny, I never met anyone who considered him *Ray amandReny*. In private, many called him little better than a witch.

The secrecy seems to have been essential to having one's power seriously. There was one young man, an occasional resident of Betafo, who openly boasted of being a *Zanadrano*, but no one really took his claims seriously for that very reason. If you really have such powers, Armand remarked, "You don't go around talking about it" (*tsy miteniteny*). Here too ambiguity, what is not said, was the ultimate proof of power.

In this, of course, they stood in marked contrast to astrologers, who were very much public figures. Noely suggested that in the end, even Ramena didn't really know what he was dealing with:

> Noely: He found this spring with a *Vazimba* in it, and . . . he doesn't even know its name. It's just there. So he decided to give it *hasina*, even though he doesn't really know what it is. In a case like that, the thing might even suddenly turn around and kill you . . .

Vazimba were unknown beings; ancestors whose names and histories were lost, whose descendants no longer existed or no longer remembered them. While astrologers like Noely's father Ratsizafy used named, legitimate ancestors as their points of access to the invisible world, *Vazimba* were the very negation of descent.[42]

Suspected Witches

People were always going to curers; curers were always telling them that their illness had been caused by relatives or neighbors. As a result, everyone in

a rural community like Betafo was, at any given time, likely to be in daily contact with at least one or two people they had reason to believe had tried to kill them or their husbands, wives, or children. If these suspicions were almost never voiced publicly, it was in part because one could never be quite sure. Curers often got it wrong. In fact, suspicions could shift rapidly: one month a woman might suspect her neighbor of trying to make her children waste away and die; the next month, she might go to a different curer and discover the neighbor was entirely innocent; the actual culprit was a ghost or an uncle from out of town.

Some people did develop particularly bad reputations: for having knowledge of love medicine, for example, or even sorcery. The obvious question: did anyone actually encourage such rumors? Were there people who intentionally set out to make others think they might be witches? It's impossible to know for sure, but my impression was there were.[43]

Certainly, there were attempts at anonymous intimidation. In the marketplace of Arivonimamo was a *hotely* whose proprietor was widely suspected of using medicine to increase his business.[44] A few weeks before I met him, he had been running about in a rage because one of his workers had noticed an object lodged under the stairs leading up to his establishment, and pulled out a bundle of silk cloth, filled with bits of wood. It was obviously meant to harm him, but almost anyone would have been able to leave it there.

Here the object was a mere token of communal hostility. It was much the same as, say, when absentee landlords discovered suspicious objects in their fields when they came to collect their third of the harvest. Other threats were more direct. Miadana's son Damien, for instance, told me about the time he had bought some rice cakes from a roadside stand in Arivonimamo—a stand run by an *andriana* woman herself originally from Betafo. After taking a bite of one, his teeth hit something hard, and he spit out an inch-long chunk of wood. Obviously, the woman had planted something. For what reason? He claimed to have no idea why she should have had a grudge against his family. When later I talked to the woman herself, she certainly did not express any; but she also told me in some detail about a house in Betafo she felt was rightly hers—she was afraid to make public claims on it, she said, for fear of witchcraft.

It is, of course, impossible to say how many people really go about slipping bits of wood into other people's food. It seems obvious it does, sometimes, happen. Still, even when it does, there's no way to know how often it's just a bluff, a splinter peeled from the nearest fence; how often, an object genuinely

believed to have harmful powers. What is clear is that such behavior is just an extreme version of a game that almost everyone plays, on some level on other, in situations of potential conflict. Always, the problem was how to hint that one might be more than one seemed, that one might have access to powers others did not, without going so far as to give rise to rumors that would endanger one's standing in the community.

It would probably be impossible for an outsider to pick up on the cues.[45] Why exactly was it so obvious to my companions that the former catechist was more than he seemed? It might have had something to do with his robust manner, his indulgent expansiveness, which Rainibe shared but which was otherwise unusual in older men, who tended to be more quiet, self-contained, and circumspect. Or then again it might have been something insincere about his laugh; maybe he avoided eye contact when he talked—or maybe he was too aggressive in initiating it. I don't know. I do think people were searching for such cues all the time—a young man's consistent neglect of proper forms of deference, for example, might be enough to start one wondering, why is it Ranona always seems to be out of town on nights with a new moon? Have you noticed how he never drinks directly from a stream of flowing water? True, he says it's because a curer gave him medicine to ward off evil ghosts, but then, he might be lying. There were all sorts of ambiguous gestures: a sudden unexpected gift where it would not normally seem called for, a sudden curiosity about another person's habits, rhythmic music in the middle of the night . . . I don't mean to suggest that anyone is playing music in the night simply for the sake of intimidating others, but the existence of such a climate meant that people had to think constantly about how their actions might be interpreted. Usually, this was to avoid suspicions but in some situations it would clearly be helpful to foster them.

As in the case of Ramena, such manipulation could be considered both a form of political action—since it was intended to generate rumors—and a way of exercising political power, since its ultimate effect was to frighten and intimidate. Usually, this was to prevent others from interfering in one's own projects: as the woman who gave Damien the suspicious rice-cakes, for instance, might have been trying to intimidate other *andriana* from Betafo to ensure they did not interfere should she ever try to lay a claim to that house. In its actual effects, then, it was similar to the logic of protection and negative authority, even if it was considered its very opposite.

The game, however, had to be played with subtlety. If you brag about

having secret powers, no one will believe you. If you violate norms of nonconfrontation too blatantly, it will rebound in other ways. In Betafo, for example, there was a forty-year-old man named Norbert. Norbert had a temper. Some said it was a bad ulcer that really was to blame: he'd get stomach pains and everything would irritate him; others made other excuses, but all acknowledged he was always picking fights—most often, with his younger brother Martin, a math teacher in Arivonimamo, and his sons by his first marriage, who he had disinherited. When he got into fights he would shout and, often, threaten violence. One Sunday morning toward the end of my stay he interrupted church services by getting into a shouting match with his oldest son Soanaivo that ended up with Norbert chasing him around the pews and threatening to kill him. The churchgoers said nothing; they stared at the floor, tried to make believe nothing was happening. . . . This sort of behavior never led anyone to make suggestions of Norbert's having unusual powers, or being a witch. To the contrary, they mainly served to confirm widespread suspicions that his wife was.

I heard about a couple notorious *mpamosavy* of years past who were men, but the ones I heard about in the present were always women. The classic profile is younger or middle-aged women who dominate their husbands, or older, socially marginal ones—particularly elderly women living alone. Here, of course, images of "witches who go out at night" to ride men like horses flow together with those of the sorcerer; women suspected of love medicine are also much more likely to be suspected of using aggressive magic.

Norbert's wife, Juliette, fit the former model. She was the woman who had convinced Norbert to disinherit his three sons by a previous marriage—and adopt her own instead. Several of his neighbors suggested Norbert had only really become so contentious after falling under her sway; all of them, including members of his family, seemed to assume that she was at least using love medicine. There is some reason to believe Juliette herself did encourage this impression. Nivo told me a story told her by her former neighbor, Rasoa. One morning, Rasoa woke up before dawn and went down to get water at the spring to the east of town, only to see Juliette walking away from some tombs on the other side of the valley. This was odd: what business would anyone have over there, so early in the morning? She strolled over to investigate, and there, at the entry to one tomb, was a frog impaled on a needle, its head pointing toward a house in Betafo in which one of Juliette's neighbors had recently fallen ill. Several days later, that person died. Nivo was inclined to believe the

story. She herself had gone down to the same spring one early morning and stumbled on Juliette, lurking about in the fields—when she noticed Nivo, she suddenly looked extremely disconcerted, turned around, and took a different path back home.

Whether or not Juliette was intentionally trying to start rumors, such stories had effects. On the one hand, people were definitely afraid of her. She was a frightening person, and people would occasionally even refer to her that way: *atahorana,* "frightening." Hence they were also afraid to cross her, or, by extension, to object too strenuously to her husband's behavior. On the other hand, every time a major quarrel arose within her family (which was often; it was an unusually contentious family) unspoken suspicions started pouring out. One afternoon there was a terrible brawl, which climaxed with Norbert and Martin grappling on the ground in the middle of their father's house. As soon as their mother, managed to separate them, Juliette started accusing her and the rest of the family of hating her because they were all still in love with the memory of Norbert's first wife; she replied that if people didn't like her, it was because everyone knew she was a witch.[46]

Among older women, too, the word *mpamosavy* tended to imply knowledge both of love medicine and of more aggressive sorts. Two women can serve as examples here. One was the older sister of Ramanana, the matriarch of Antanety, who after an infertile marriage had moved next to her sister, old and childless.[47] She was notorious for knowledge of love medicine, and Miadana's children all told me they were afraid to eat at the woman's house, particularly if they had any reason to believe that anyone in her family had sexual designs on them. Another, even older woman from Anosy (whose children had long since moved away) was notorious for her long romantic entanglement with an equally elderly man: the story was she had used love medicine to win him over, and had ever since been "going out at night." People were respectful enough to her face, but behind her back, gossip was continual. Any power such women might have gained from this reputation was hardly significant in comparison. In another time, they would probably have been the first to be put to the poison ordeal.

Witch-Catchers and Other Powerful People

Actually, the proceeding sketch only includes a few of the most striking social types. There were other ways to make claims to hidden power, without

necessarily sacrificing one's reputation. For example, one might foster the reputation of being a *mpisambotra mpamosavy,* or "witch-catcher."

I knew a couple of witch-catchers from Betafo. They were oddly ambivalent characters. Witch-catchers were men[48] who, armed with powerful medicine, ventured out at night to do battle with witches, but they did not do so in order to protect the community against evil. They did it to get money. They would place medicine on the roofs of tombs, then hide in the bushes waiting for the witches to come out to dance naked on top of them. When they did, the witches would be caught by the medicine—suddenly fixed to the spot, unable to escape. This, of course, put a witch in a terrible position; unless she was released, she would be discovered there at sunrise, naked and covered with grease, by everyone who happened by. So the witch-catcher could appear and demand money—in fact, witches were said to keep a collection of hidden funds[49] for just this reason—take the cash, and let the witches go home.

A number of local historical figures[50] were said to have been witch-catchers. Miadana said her grandfather had been one; he was also a Protestant evangelist, and now and then would end up trapping one of his own parishioners, to their great embarrassment. A number of men alive today—mainly men in their forties—continue to have this reputation, though most prefer not to talk about it. Solofo, the *andraina* smith from Belanitra, is one. I didn't even try to interview him on the subject; it would obviously have been fruitless. But people assured me he had to keep a special set of *fady* because of the medicine; that whenever he got drunk with friends in Arivonimamo and ended up eating sausage with garlic in it, his wife had to prepare a special bath with the scrapings of medicinal woods to undo the damage to its *hasina.*

It is not entirely clear what social advantage Solofo gets from this, but the logic of witch-catching is clear enough. It is about the only way one can openly claim knowledge of aggressive medicine without becoming morally reprobate.

The most famous witch-catcher of Betafo's past was a man named Rakotoamboa, who once lived in the now abandoned Catholic village of Fiadanana, above Ambaribe. He had been a minor official (*mpiadidy*) under the colonial regime; he was also the uncle of Ramena's great rival Rasaona. While Ramena himself would almost always tend to play down anything having to do with medicine when talking about his half of the territory, he didn't at all mind talking about Rakotoamboa. In fact, he seemed to take a special pleasure in it. Once I asked him whether he had ever heard any stories about *tangena* being

used in the western half of Betafo in early colonial times—since I'd heard it was, occasionally, in the east. He immediately replied that there certainly were not. However, they did have witch-catchers, like Rakotoamboa:

> Ramena: Here, they never used to kill people by making them drink *tangena* or anything like that: they would just catch the witches, take their money, and then they'd just let them go [Laughs].
> David: You mean they only did it for the money?
> Ramena: Only did it for the money.
> David: So he . . . would he need medicine to do that?
> Ramena: Oh, he'd need medicine all right. He would have gone out there without any? I must admit, though—the man was truly skillful [*tena mahay be*]. For my part, I was held up by witches quite often. At that time I was a practicing midwife, and I'd have to travel at night—people might come to my house to get me at eleven at night and then I'd go home again after the baby was born. So I'd be heading home, and they'd hold me up. But he was skillful: he'd go out ahead and even though just one person he'd become as high as a house. He would go out front and he'd become huge like . . . when you looked at him, he'd be the size of those ox carts over there. Truly skillful, absolutely he was.
>
> But if those *lolo* get to you, you know, you won't be left alive . . .
>
> Once, long ago, Ingahibe Randrianjanaka and I went out to do some blacksmithing in Antsahavory. They intercepted him on the road right before you get to Belanitra—took him away and dunked him down bubbling under the water down there to the north. Dunked him all the way down to the top of his head. And he was sick. . . . He couldn't work a forge, he couldn't do anything, he was just sick from that time on.
>
> There was also the late Ingodina, the younger brother of Razanakolona Bernard from Ambohimanjaka. He was driving an ox cart and Rafiringa—the owner of the cart—met him and took over driving. He started saying, "Hold up a bit, Firinga!" he was saying, "or you're really going to kill me!" But it wasn't Rafiringa there at all, it was a witch. She'd got on near Belanitra and—she was both driving the cart and yanking at Ingodina's tongue. The cart went careening along but it didn't flip over, it kept going and finally arrived safe and sound at Ambohimanjaka.
>
> On it went—but it was a woman driving the ox cart! Then, when the cart finally arrived by the entry of the village, she sent the late Ingodina into his house and left. And as soon as Ingodina went into the house, his tongue came rolling out as long as this [showing the length of his forearm] and then he died.
>
> Truly evil, those witches.
>
> When it was transplanting season, or autumn, there would be people sick with fever here in Ambaribe, and the witches would be playing, knocking on their doors at night. (We were still living in Antanetibe back then.) Ingahibe Rakotoamboa would go *circling* around the rice fields with bits of medicine that looked like a tattered mat, placing some in every field, thrusting it in, thrusting it in, thrusting it in . . .
>
> They say some of them would actually send for him. I'm speaking here of a certain Rainimanantsikivy who would send word to Rakotoamboa: "If you're

> going to be fooling around with medicine, then come see me!" They'd have their little contests down there to the south. "Let's test our strength against each other, then!" So they'd start wrestling each other down there, stripped down to their loincloths, and each would be catching each other, the witch and the catcher. . . . Just a cloth around their hips and they'd be grappling, wrestling, wrestling away . . .
>
> That is, Rakotoamboa would be wrestling with the witch—with Rainimanantsikivy.
>
> CHANTAL: This was a woman?
>
> RAMENA: Yes, a woman. They'd be flipping each other over, back and forth, till in the end, still she couldn't overcome Rakotoamboa so "enough already!" she would say: "How about we make a date, and you come back again tomorrow?" [laughs] They'd always be making those dates, until one day Rakotoamboa finally defeated her. He threw her—"Get out your money," he said, "because I've got you!" [he laughs again] That's the story. We're hardly going to have seen such things ourselves, but that's the story.

With its juxtaposition of horror and whimsy, Ramena's narrative captures perfectly the feel of the night-world that surrounds Merina villages, a world of vaguely defined dangers, in which even grown men do not dare wander freely about. Of course, he is deploying all this to make a point about his rival's uncle. First he evokes images of witches' evil, the damage they can do; then, tells a long story about Rakotoamboa's rather collegial relation with them. The final anecdote uses the familiar motif of the game-like contest to imply that there's not much difference between catcher and caught. Hence the image of the caught and catcher, rolling back and forth, indistinguishable in the grass at night. The sexual innuendo of the wrestling episode (for what purpose would a man and woman normally make repeated assignations at night, let alone one involving their taking off their clothes and grappling with one another?) only serves to reinforce the equivalence.[51]

Even witch-catchers, then, open themselves up to a degree of suspicion.

There are any number of other ways to claim access to hidden powers. Some claimed to be in communication, not with *Vazimba,* but other lost spirits who had revealed themselves in dreams. Others openly admitted to magical knowledge, but of a relatively innocuous sort, say, having learned certain way of curing enchanted teeth, say, or having an *ody* which allows them to treat wounds made by animals. Knowledge of this sort might not make a person particularly imposing, but it opened up the possibility one may be familiar with more dangerous forms as well. Almost everyone kept some kind of protection medicine (usually provided by an astrologer or medium), at the very least, something to protect their fields from thieves. Some had obvious

aggressive potential, such as medicine which protected the owner from being harmed by blows, or knives, or an opponents words in lawsuits.[52] There were also commercial *ody,* which were more dubious, and shaded into love magic, which shaded into outright sorcery. There were endless gossip and speculation about who had access to these different forms of knowledge. But to understand the pattern of speculation—it certainly was not random—one has to examine typical careers and life trajectories.

Life Trajectories

So far I have been arguing that persons are largely defined by their knowledge and capacities. These however are seen as varying over the course of one's life. The ideal male life-course, perhaps, is that typical of nineteenth-century fairy tales (e.g., Cousins 1963): young man breaks away from one's parents at a relatively young age, goes to seek his fortune, and then, successful, settles down and manages keep one's own children and grandchildren from leaving home in turn. Armand, for example, spent most of his time away from Betafo, amassing money, but however cosmopolitan in his perspectives—the walls of his apartment in Arivonimamo were covered with photographs cut out of French news magazines, tableaus of wars, movie stars, rock stars, world leaders—his ultimate ambitions (unless there actually was a revolution) were entirely traditional. His ultimate aim was to acquire enough land to settle his children in Betafo; his most cherished ambition, to be someday known as a consummate traditional orator.

While it was understood that young men and women would spent long periods away from home, it was also expected that they ought to grow more sedentary as they got older. Young men would work as drivers in the taxi cooperative in Arivonimamo, attend distant schools, seek work in the capital; even those in their mid-thirties and forties usually had some regular trade to supplement their income—in Betafo, most adult men were either smiths, or, involved in trading wrought iron goods—but by one's late forties or early fifties, around the time one's children start to marry, one should ideally be able to set these things aside. The mark of true success was to be self-sufficient in rice by this stage, not to have to buy any during the months before harvest, when most families were experiencing a shortfall. To be successful, then, was to be able to largely withdraw from the cash economy—at least when it came

to food. The fact that very few families were actually able to do this did not detract from the ideal.[53]

I have already contrasted *fahaizana* and memory as forms of knowledge oriented to the future and past, respectively. Both money and medicine were seen as future-oriented in this way; they were also seen as the particular medium of young people, especially young men just beginning their careers.[54]

It was almost always young men who were suspected of knowing about medicine to protect against blows and knives, or sorcery meant to avenge sexual rejection; usually young women who were suspected of love medicine. But people would also tend to assume that "children" in their twenties were unlikely to have any general mastery of medicine. It was only when one was in one's thirties and forties, at the point of establishing a family, that such suspicions might arise. But at this stage, though, any particular remarkable success—particularly, financial success—was likely to be interpreted as evidence of arcane knowledge.

Medicine in its essence was the stuff of individual realization, of the domain of desire and personal achievement. It was most appropriate to the age when one is engaged in individual projects, when one moves in the medium of the cash economy. Even such a hoary figure as Ratsizafy might be suspected of having engaged in dubious financial pursuits involving medicine in their youth—such stories were amusing and scandalous but they didn't do anything, really, to damage his present reputation. He was just a child at the time. When older people were still behaving like that (as Ramena or Rainibe were said to), though, the implication was that they have abandoned any possibility of being considered representatives of a large community because of their amoral pursuit of gain.

Often, those whose claims to invisible powers were taken most seriously were men in their mid-forties: men at the cusp of their ambitions, not yet sure whether they would be able to fully realize them. The same time as others would be pursuing political office. Here was when the game of balancing a reputation for power against the suspicions of evil deeds became the most delicate, because it was the point where individual power and wealth had to be converted into ancestral authority. It was at this stage people began having visions of lost ancestors, creating hail medicine, or becoming witch-catchers.

Those who did were almost always people trying to establish a new family in a new place: for instance, Sely who had moved back to *tampon-tanana,*

intending to found a new prominent family (widely rumored to know about hail and even lightning medicine); Irina's father who had moved to Antanety (and created a hail charm for his family); even Rainibe, who founded his own settlement at Anjakalambo, could be included on this list.

If one is successful in founding a family and acquires ancestral authority, intimidation becomes less important; there are other ways to prevent others from acting. When men in their fifties and sixties do admit to having medicine, they tend, like astrologers, to identify the medicine with ancestral authority, and to use it to establish some kind of wider clientele. The most common way of doing this was to operate an *ody havandra,* or hail charm.

I heard about at least four of these in Betafo's territory. The most famous by far (named Ravatomaina) was kept by Ratsizafy, the astrologer. It protected almost all the crops in Betafo's eastern half. It was also by far the most ancient, and Ratsizafy made a great point of its antiquity, which, he said, had been passed down from father to son for more than a century. The others were just recent inventions (*zavatra namboariny vao haingana*); anonymous things created long since Malagasy times.

This was true, but in each case the current holder did claim some sort of pedigree, and allowed the holder to impose taboos.[55] Not only were they inherited from ancestors, then, they allowed their owners to extend something very like ancestral authority beyond the confines of descent.[56]

Women's Careers

So far I have been describing the ideal *male* career. Obviously this represents only half the story.

In their broadest outlines, women's careers are not so very different. There is the same tendency to move from relative mobility to relative stability, though it is not nearly so consistent since a number of older and quite successful women moved around quite a bit. Part of the reason is because they had usually married more than once. Armand's mother Razafindravao, for instance, had three homes: an apartment in Arivonimamo; a house in her natal village of Ialamalaza, about twenty minutes walk from Arivonimamo, where she had descendants from one marriage; and a place in Betafo, where she would often stay with her children by her second marriage (who also, however, spent a fair amount of their time in Arivonimamo). To move around between the homes of one's scattered descendants was an option taken up by a

fair number of older women—often ones who would have to be considered the most successful—but not, as far as I could tell, a majority.

The political role of women is an especially interesting issue. One might imagine that if the subordination of women comes largely through their exclusion from a formal public sphere, then the Merina situation would put women in an unusually advantageous situation. Especially since, in the absence of a competitive public arena, politics was largely played out through gossip and the flow of stories and impressions—a medium dominated, in fact, by women. But this is not what happened. At least when it came to establishing an independent, public persona, women were at a decided disadvantage because of the very importance of covert forms of power, and subtle games of insinuation. It was precisely here that women were hobbled by suspicion. Women were far more likely to be accused of witchcraft than men—particularly, those with powerful or charismatic personalities, who would have been most suited to taking on a political role. Even more, suggestions of witchcraft seemed to weigh more heavily against women; they were more likely to completely deprive women of public legitimacy or a public voice. The exercise of the sort of subtle implication of power regularly indulged in by men was much more likely to lead to destroying a woman's reputation completely. What's more, the likelihood of this increased as one got older, to the point where any woman over the age of fifty or sixty who was not firmly ensconced in a position of authority—who was not fronting for some man, usually a dead husband, as head of a local family—was likely to find that almost any way in which she asserted herself would lead to being labeled as a witch. It was still possible for women to achieve communal authority, but it took far more political savvy and psychological acumen for a woman to achieve this than for a man.[57]

Magic and History (Again)

So far, I have been representing life trajectories as if most of them were successful. But very few men actually become significant elders; even when someone's life actually did approximate the fairy-tale ideal, I rarely heard it told as a story. Those stories I did hear were much more likely to be stories of personal tragedy—usually, framed as tales of transgression and retribution. This is significant because it was especially through the lens of such personal dramas that people thought about wider historical change.

Take the village of Belanitra, the settlement just to the south of Betafo.

This is a place that had been undergoing a broad economic decline during the years leading up to my visit. Its inhabitants were all *andriana*, mostly farmers or smiths without much experience of commerce or working for wages, or much taste for it. When the economic crunch set in in the 1980s, and the cost of living soared, they were in much worse position to adapt than most of Betafo's *mainty*. The result was a steady decline in standards of living, and even—with medical services becoming more expensive—increasing illness and disease. 1988, the year before I arrived in Madagascar, saw a massive epidemic of malaria caused by the government no longer being able to afford the maintenance on the mosquito eradication project begun in colonial times. Thousands died across Imerina, and several in Belanitra.

Many, however, seemed to think of Belanitra mainly as a community of sinners. This certainly was the impression given by Rakotojaona, a part-time resident, whose wife (Mariel) was the local schoolteacher. The most important ancestral fady, he once explained to me, were not to steal, not to marry slaves, not to sell outsiders one's ancestral land, or *tanindrazana*.

> Rakotojaona: The late Rabe, Razafy's husband: that Rabe was one of the richest men in Belanitra. He sold his ancestral land, and now he's poor. Now, his wife Razafy is in terrible distress. Manioc in the morning, manioc in the afternoon, manioc in the evening—I've seen it myself.
>
> That man who lives in that one little isolated house you pass right after leaving Belanitra—he too sold the ancestral land and became poor . . . Rainizanana, Rabe, Rakolona, they're all people who sold their ancestral land. . . . None got away with it!
>
> Neither do you see any thieves survive here. Randimby—he was one of Rabera's family—died. When he was still a young man. Ratefy here in Belanitra: dead. One shouldn't stand in judgment over the dead, but it's true. Tosy: he stole, and died when he was still young. (He also didn't respect his father . . .)
>
> Solofo, the smith, was proud before his father. His father tried to set him straight, but he refused to take his father seriously. The father you know would say, "Just work those ricefields and don't be like that . . ." But "you, you're nothing to me," he'd say, "you'll be dead before I ever do it . . ." That's what he said to his father. That Solofo—he's just grown poorer, poorer continually ever since.

It is easy to see how continual, gradual impoverishment can come to be individualized this way. Everything becomes more expensive; everyone is working harder, struggling, scheming; poverty exacerbates all the little rifts and tensions of ordinary life; people quarrel; families quarrel; some people are driven by desperation to steal; others are forced to sell some of their lands—and, of course, one can ask a much higher price if one sells it to outsiders . . . In the

common perception, however, effects become causes. In any given case, the desperate state of individuals is seen as punishment for the very results of their desperation.

I don't want to imply that this individualization is simply an ideological screen, disguising the real origin of people's problems. Actually, most people in rural Imerina might not have known much about the details of international politics—they may or may not have heard of the IMF—but I found them to have a very accurate understanding of their situation. Almost anyone would be able to expound on the fact that Madagascar was an extremely a poor country, with little access to technology or technological knowledge, that the powerful nations of the world had no interest in seeing this change, or that the Malagasy government was made up of thieves who cared about little more than lining their own pockets. It's just notoriously difficult (anywhere, really) to relate the understanding of processes on such a large scale to events which affect the lives of specific individuals—or, anyway, to make it something that can make the course of individual lives seem meaningful.[58]

This same way of conceiving individual trajectories—that some people are able to marshal hidden arcane forms of knowledge which make their actions effective and thus can become prosperous and prominent; that others offend ancestral powers and are punished by a downward slide—can also be applied to much longer historical processes. On another occasion, for instance, Rakotojaona suggested I might find it worthwhile to study the phenomena of *andriana* decadence (he used the French word, *decheance*). I have already mentioned how most people saw the *andriana* of Betafo as a group as sinking into exhaustion, poverty, and defeat, but most also saw this as punishment for the way they treated slaves—or simply the fact that they had them. In doing so they were applying the same rubric Rakotojaona did to individuals in Belanitra. Transgression. Retribution. In the same way, a number of *andriana* would suggest that the success of the *mainty,* as a group, was mainly due to their successful manipulation of medicine: "You know, that village of Morafeno used to be an *andriana* village," said Lala (also from Belanitra), "but those people took it over with their . . . ," making a little gesture with her hands as if scraping bits of wood. If the focus was not on their own decline but on their former slaves' advances, *andriana* speakers were most inclined to borrow the fairy-tale rubric of the young man who starts with nothing but then makes good by dubious practices involving money and medicine.

Conclusions

I began this chapter with a discussion of narratives first of all, because I wanted to make a case that narratives always play a central role in politics. I suggested that political action itself might be defined as action meant to be more widely recounted or represented, and so to influence other people's actions—or, if not that, then perhaps it is action which plays some part in the overall process of recounting or representing action in order to do so. This was not meant to be a final definition (no doubt it could bear refinement) but I thought it was a useful way to frame things because it raised all sorts of interesting questions about gender, the relation between actors and narrators, historical memory, and how action itself tends to be defined.

By raising the issue of narrative, I was also trying to create a set of tools that could be used to examine how politics works in a place such as rural Imerina which—as Bloch first noted—appears to lack formal political institutions. Most dramatically lacking were any explicit arenas of public competition or conflict in which decisions were made which would have broader social effects.[59] Far from recording and celebrating such contests, Merina historical traditions seemed to go out of their way to ridicule them. Similarly, there was little sense that one could gain authority by identifying oneself with the intentions of heroic figures of the past. To do so would have been making oneself the vehicle of another person's will, to reduce oneself to the status of a soldier or a slave.

It was partly for this reason I developed the whole elaborate argument about "suspense," "mystery," and "reversals"; that while narratives of the first sort hold the audience's interest by encouraging them to identify with the characters' projects of action, the other kinds cause the audience to identify with the characters by placing them in the same situation with regard to knowledge. Most people avoided the "suspense" form even when talking about everyday events.

It's not that people in Betafo believed the intentions of people of the past no longer affected them. But the assumption was that historical intentions lingered of their own accord. Communities like Betafo were full of ghosts. The desires and purposes of its past inhabitants had a tendency to break off and become lodged in the landscape in the form of hidden medicine, tombs, rocks, trees, endless varieties of displaced and alienated powers. One of the main ways of establishing one's authority, then, became a matter of knowing

about these things. This, I said, had an effect on narrative form. Stories about the past rarely took the form of "suspense," and were much more likely to take the form of "mysteries" or "reversals."

Actually, if one goes over the various narratives that I cite in part 2, one finds that the form of stories is if anything even more flexible. If one defines a story as an account of action which holds the audience's interest by making them want to know what happens in the end, then many are not stories at all. Some are simple descriptions (most of what Jean Marie says, for instance, is descriptive, not narrative, in form). But some do take a clearly narrative form.

One of the most obvious of these is François's story about the child who lost control of his hand. This is definitely structured as a mystery. The story starts with an event whose explanation is mysterious—a child snatches a bird's nest, his hand becomes unusable—the audience continues listening from a desire to know what really happened and why. The question is resolved when the medium discovers that the child had disturbed some ghostly soldiers who lived underneath the tree. Since the matter is posed as a mystery, it is the explanation, not the cure, which acts as the real resolution of the story—the cure, in fact, mainly serves as proof that this curer's explanation was indeed correct.[60] In fact, this was typical of stories about curing. Anyone with a sickly child, I found, was usually able to recount a long and detailed history of the various astrologers, mediums, and other specialists they had consulted, but the stories almost always focused, not on the treatments given and whether or not these had lead to improvements in the child's condition, but on the process of discovering the condition's ultimate cause. Again, the narrative was structured in such a way that the final improvement of the child's condition acted as a sort of coda, proof this curer had finally gotten the answer right.

However, many of the other accounts in part 2 eliminate the element of mystery altogether, and strip things down to the explanation and the coda. Take Mariel's account of the "beasts of Andrianony." She begins by saying what happened: there was a man with evil medicine, he buried it near the dam, when he died the medicine transformed into monsters; when the monsters appear to someone, that means someone in that person's family will die. She follows with a concrete example: not long ago Andre's daughter saw the creatures and someone in her family did indeed die soon afterward. This is a very common style of exposition. First comes the account of distant wonders, things which might seem incredible and which can only be known by hearsay;

then follows a much more recent piece of concrete evidence, almost always, something a living witness has seen with their own eyes. The movement is from mere words to visible images, *zavatra hita maso,* "things seen with the eye," which is in rural Imerina the commonsense definition of incontestable truth.[61]

Now, by my own definition, this style of exposition is not really narrative at all. These are really more forms of argument, direct efforts to persuade what is assumed to be a skeptical audience. But other stories—for instance Rainibe's, about the lovers who turned into trees—takes this simple two-part structure and transforms it into something very like a narrative.

Rainibe's account also begins with an account of rather unlikely events, set in the distant past. In this case, the important news—the fact that the lovers have transformed into trees—is revealed only through words, when one of them explains what happened to a living person in a dream. But then a new character is introduced, a skeptic, who, having heard the exact same account Rainibe's audience has now heard, refuses to believe it and sets out to demonstrate it wasn't true. Finally, when his ax draws blood, his actions lead to incontrovertible, visible proof that the verbal account was accurate, or if nothing else, that something extraordinary had truly taken place. Here, the audience's presumed skeptical reaction to hearing the account is embodied in a character, one with whom they will feel inclined to identify exactly in so far as they are dubious about the veracity of what the narrator has already said. Then that character is presented with a reversal of his expectations so dramatic that even he's convinced.

In Betafo, at least, this was an extremely common narrative form. An account of wonders is followed by uncertainty, the story ends when skeptical witnesses are confronted with visible proof.[62] The evidence moves from words to visual evidence. It is not clear whether such accounts should even be called narratives, because what ties together their various episodes is not a course of action, a desire on the part of the audience to know what happens, but an attempt to convince the audience of something; in so far as they use narrative techniques (mysteries, reversals) it is by injecting the skeptical listener herself into the confines of the story, where the narrator can make the effect they would like to have on the audience an explicit part of the plot.

In part 3, I turned from the political importance of knowledge of hidden powers to a discussion of the circulation of rumors about hidden powers in

the present. The accounts cited in this section of the chapter are very different from those collected in part 2. None of them, in fact, are narrative in form.

It might be useful here to consider Ramena's long account about Rakotoamboa, the witch-catcher, since this has the most obvious resemblance to a narrative. It consists of a number of episodes, and some of these episodes actually do take the form of narratives—for instance, the story of the ox cart that was actually driven by a witch, which contained elements of both mystery and surprise. However, it is not the resolution of some chain of action that binds the episodes together. If the audience is paying attention, it's not because they want to know what happens in the end. The episodes have no chronological or causal connections with each other; descriptions of habitual action blend into accounts of singular events: Rakotoamboa used to save me from witches, a witch once killed Ingodina; he used to meet with them in the fields at night; several times he met Rainimanantsikivy . . . What connected the episodes together, and made the account into a unity, was not action but how each contributed to process of establishing Rakotoamboa's character, and gave the audience a way to think about how they should judge him. This is why Ramena begins by emphasizing his skill with medicine (incidentally admitting the man had saved him from witches), then provides two episodes which served to emphasize just how wicked and murderous witches really are, and then—after an odd little interlude where he reintroduces the theme of Rakotoamboa using medicine to protect against witches, but adding what seems to be a gratuitous sexual innuendo ("thrusting, thrusting . . .")—ends with the account of Rakotoamboa's "dates" with Rainimanantsikivy, an account which takes the sexual innuendo to an almost ridiculous extreme, as a way of underlining how Rakotoamboa and these extremely evil witches could often be rather difficult to tell apart.

All of this is even more true of the accounts of Ramena himself, which are also contained in part 3. They are not there so much for narrative interest as to provide evidence of character. And this seems typical of most of what we are used to calling gossip; gossip consists almost entirely of prolonged meditations on character. It involves a constant exchange of bits of information which are of interest mainly in so far as they help one to assess other people's moral qualities—a task most people find pleasurable in itself, even when it is not also of practical relevance to them.[63] By my definition, this circulation is obviously a political phenomena. But the main point of part 3 was that in

Betafo, it had become a medium of politics in an even more important way. Since almost everyone was trying to balance a reputation for moral decency against at least the suggestion they might have access to potentially destructive kinds of knowledge, the very circulation of gossip—of information which would help others to stand in judgment over others—had also become one of the most important ways of establishing power.

It would be very interesting to know how unusual this really is.

The next chapter, told mainly from the point of view of Miadana and her family, will provide some very clear examples of how accounts of recent events tend to be organized for political effect: how the characters the audience is asked to sympathize with are usually represented as utterly passive, and how those who initiate the action are almost always represented as being clearly in the wrong.

THE TRIALS OF MIADANA

7

Let me return to Miadana's family, and recount some of the difficulties they faced on moving to Betafo. They are particularly useful witnesses because—as they continually pointed out—they arrived in Betafo understanding very little about how authority, in a rural community, actually worked. They too had to start from scratch.[1] Hence, when I showed up they felt an immediate affinity; in fact, they clearly relished the opportunity to tell another newcomer all the things it had taken them so long to learn.

Learning the story from the point of view of such anomalous people obviously had its limitations. For one thing, Miadana and her family were not real participants in most of the delicate games I've been describing. At least, they did not go around dropping hints about their possible access to hidden medicine. But their situation was not so very different; much of their power was based on being able to make similar intimations of power on the basis of their identification with the government. Instead of the ghostly intentions of medicine, their presence evoked the ghostly image of the state—and while they never openly suggested they might have access to unusual powers by dint of their contacts in the government, neither did they do anything to discourage such speculation. In this too, their strategy was typical: almost everyone, when speaking of their own role in local politics, would present themselves as passive spectators, speak in awe or indignation of other people's self-assertion, without ever suggesting they might be capable of such a thing themselves.

Fady

Miadana's trouble with *fady* began even before her family were living in Betafo. It was around 1980 that Claude began having serious medical troubles

and was forced into early retirement from his administrative post. At first he got a part-time job in Arivonimamo, where life was cheaper, their property in Betafo closer, and there were still good schools for their children. Their oldest, Haingo, was still attending high school at the time. Eventually, though, he had to abandon even that.

At that point, most of their fields were still being worked by sharecroppers, and Claude's mother's old house on *tampon-tanana*—which her father had built in 1940—was occupied by an old *mainty* servant. When the family did visit Betafo, it was with the sense of a pleasant country outing. Like most inhabitants of the capital, one of their first thoughts on finding themselves in the countryside was to find a nice secluded place and have a picnic. There was a beautiful spot just below Betafo to the northeast, invisible from all around, where waters from a hidden spring runs softly between huge flat rocks, forming little pools, a place overhung by ancient trees.

> Miadana: The second year we took a trip, and came here. And when we took trips, we were still living the life of Antananarivo—"We'll be able to do a little fishing," "We can have a picnic." So we brought along everything—plates, pots—and had a picnic down there by the water. Afterwards we washed the dishes by the waterside. What did we know? We washed the cloth, washed the pots there. People came to speak with us: "You're not allowed to wash things here, not anything. Especially not the blackened bottoms of pots."
>
> We were really amazed! "Oh! So what is it about this water that we shouldn't be able to wash things in it?"
>
> "We'll tell Ingahy Ratsizafy!"
>
> We were really amazed.
>
> So the rest of the pots, this is what we had to do with them: we had to carry them all way up the hill and wash them there so as not to dirty the water again.

It was a scene that would repeat again and again, as her family became more of a presence in Betafo. The first step came when they decided to take some of their fields back from their sharecroppers, and begin working them themselves—at first, with the help of hired laborers from town. Then in 1986, they moved in to the house on *tampon-tanana.*[2] At the time, there were two other occupied houses there. One had belonged to Raoelizaka, and was now occupied by his widow. The other was Sely's; he had recently separated from his first wife and married his former servant, a black woman named Rasoa, and had two children by her.

Sely and Raoelizaka were born country people, from a village to the west of Betafo, connected to its illustrious center by what were considered rather tenuous female lines. They had built their social position as mediators between

the great *andriana* of the capital, who still owned most of the best land around Betafo, and the more humble people they had left behind. As organizers of sharecropping, they had every reason to be a little disconcerted when a family of great *andriana* actually appeared, and started working their fields themselves. Scolding them about local *fady* was one way to establish their seniority. Claude and Miadana felt they had no choice but to defer, at least in public. The result was that, three years later when I showed up and started asking questions—by which time Rasoamanana was dead, and Sely a broken shadow of his former self—they had for years been observing a number of *fady* most of Betafo's residents had never even heard of.

Now, it is significant I think that about the only person willing to back up Sely about all these *fady* was a man who was actually his greatest rival. Augustin,[3] former *President Fokontany* (1975–1982), also based a good part of his social position—and living—as a mediator with wealthy absentees. Augustin was of *mainty* descent, and lived in Andrianony, but his reputation for energy, grave efficiency, and almost comprehensive local knowledge made him much more reliable, in the eyes of most absentees, than Sely. Over the last five or six years he had been slowly taking over the management of much of the sharecropping.[4] He wasn't likely to be very happy about seeing former absentees reclaiming their fields either, even more so because he was trying to define himself as spokesman for Betafo's black inhabitants, who actually worked these same fields. Miadana ultimately came to the conclusion that his real aims were to make life so difficult for anyone who tried to live on *tampontanana* that they would all leave, and the place become a wasteland. It is probably not insignificant that Augustin was also one of the first people to tell me that story about the *andriana* ancestor burning down the town; he actively wanted the center of Betafo to be an empty space, destroyed by the weight of history. At any rate, he always encouraged as broad a view as possible of what was not allowed there.

The most onerous *fady*, though, were the ones imposed by Ratsizafy's hail medicine. These were, indeed, stricter than any other I ever heard of: no onions or garlic in the growing season, no *voanjo bory* (Cape Peas, one of the two most popular varieties of bean); if one wants to open a gourd one has to take it outside the limits of the village; there were all sorts of restrictions of crops that could not be grown or not be grown at certain times; restrictions on making noise or picking fruit and many other things besides. Here too, it was Augustin—an ally and relative of Ratsizafy—who was the most persistent in

lecturing the newcomers about what they couldn't do, though almost everyone felt free to warn them if they thought they were breaking one, and threaten to go tell Ratsizafy.

The family adopted the classic Malagasy style of resistance: whenever someone came to lecture them, they assured them they would certainly obey the rules, then they tried their best to continue exactly as before.

> Chantal: That's an awful lot of *fady*. So if someone were to break the *fady*, then . . . what?
> Claude: They'd probably commit some act of spite against you.
> Miadana: That's all they'd do. Just that but . . .
> Chantal: And you've never been caught by such an act of spite?
> Miadana: We've never been caught by one. But just the same, we break them all the time. Violate the things to do no matter what or what or what, break every single one of them. That's what we do. We totally violate them, you have to say we do not follow the ancestral customs. They're not really ancestral customs anyway, the ones we've come across, they really aren't. We don't follow them. "Didn't you know about the custom—didn't you know that *voanjo bory* aren't allowed in the village?" they'd say. "It's because of the hail medicine." So we tested it, we ate some, looked at the sky, and the rain came. And when it had stopped raining . . .
> Chantal: There was no hail?
> Miadana: None. None at all.

A *fady* is "true" (*marina*) if transgressing it produces a disastrous effect. Miadana was appealing to one very common way of talking about *hasina;* I often heard about people who had tested *fady* or other customs in this way—though doing so is also considered very risky, since everyone knows there's nothing that more riles a spirit than some skeptic intentionally testing it. But that's what Miadana did, and by doing so, she produced an anti-narrative: we violated the *fady*; there was not a trace of hail. These customs aren't real. They're "not really ancestral customs."

Talk of "spite" (*ankasomparana*) took matters even further. *Ankasomparana* was a synonym for witchcraft. Claude in particular was inclined to suspect even if one transgressed the rules and something *did* happen, it would probably just be that. If the body of Ratsizafy's ancestor was ever exposed to sunlight, it was often said, his spirit would grow angry and bring down hail on the crops. When Miadana first told me this story, Claude made it clear he was unconvinced. "It's the *descendants* of Rainitamaina that would bring down the hail, not him," he muttered. In general, he suspected Ratsizafy's pretensions to ancestral authority were so much nonsense; really, he was just making up all these restrictions, then imposing his will through the entirely illegitimate threat of force.

It was not difficult to maintain a sphere of autonomy in their relatively isolated house on *tampon-tanana.* After Raketamanana died in 1987, they were left with only one real neighbor; anyway, there was little way anyone had to know what they were eating in the privacy of their home. But people were suspicious. In fact, even during the time I was there, the family was coming under greater and greater pressure. Miadana began telling me they had to go to ever greater pains to disguise their violation of taboos. I was a bit insulated from popular opinion in this matter, since I was so worried about betraying my friends' trust that I tried to avoid ever letting the topics of "taboo" and "Miadana" both come up in the same conversation. But I did hear rumors that Ratsizafy had been sniffing around their fields. Toward the end of my stay, even Armand made a point of uncomfortably remarking to me that "a lot of people" were very upset about the possibility of damage to the crops. I passed it on to her. Two weeks before I left, Miadana herself suddenly announced to me that she had discovered there was really something to those warnings after all. One evening, she said, they had sat down to a meal spiced with liberal amounts of garlic; almost as soon as they had put the first spoonful of rice to their lips, a splatter of hail came crashing against the rooftop. It was a small, localized attack of hail that seemed to primarily affect the area of their own house. "We were amazed," she said "It's really true."

I dutifully told Armand.

Illness and Attack

By the early '80s, there were few white people left in the northeastern quarter of the territory which contained the ancient capital and the oldest and most productive rice fields. In the southeast were three *andriana* villages,[5] in Betafo, there were of course the two households on *tampon-tanana,* but very few others. The last of the old *andriana* families of Andrianony (Andre's) had finally abandoned the place, founding a little hamlet of their own across the fields. That left one childless *andriana* woman, Razafisoa, in Andrianony, and one *andriana* family in Avarakady—most of whose members were only occasionally around. The vast majority of those who maintained tombs in the old village were living elsewhere; the most successful, in government positions in the capital. For most of the latter, Betafo was a token of prestige, proof of *andriana* status, but little more than that. They did not have any real objection to seeing it dominated by the descendants of slaves, especially if these were

responsible individuals like Augustin who took good care of their ancestral tombs and rice fields.

Things changed a little by the middle of the decade. By the mid-eighties, government salaries had sunk so low that a typical civil servant wasn't paid enough to buy a full year's worth of rice; everyone was pursuing additional sources of income. Suddenly, access to good agricultural land became a much more significant resource.

The first to return to Betafo was Solo, the son of a public servant from Antananarivo. In the late '70s, his father, descendant of the great family of Antsahasoa, had rebuilt his family's house in Andrianony, apparently toying with the idea of retiring there. It was not entirely unheard of for civil servants to retire to their ancestral lands; though as it happened, he never got around to it. When he died, however, his son Solo, who was having a very hard time making ends meet in the capital, decided to move in and take up farming. There were rumors others would soon follow. Some did: Miadana's family for instance; others who filtered back to live with relatives in Belanitra, Anosy, and villages farther west. A few more moved to Arivonimamo, and began working their fields in Betafo, or hiring others to do so. Even those who did not began to take a much greater interest in their fields: Rakotonarivo Auguste's younger brother Rahoby, for example, an engineer who spent a great deal of time in France, and Claude's aunt Esther, began visiting Betafo regularly, paying much more careful attention to who was working their fields, and what they were producing.

In the long run, however, the number of returnees was quite limited, particularly in the northeast. One reason for this was that the black people of Betafo had set up a concerted campaign of resistance. A key weapon was the fear of sorcery.

First, there was a systematic effort to keep absentees from actually entering Betafo. If one came to Arivonimamo and sent word ahead, sharecroppers would ensure their one-third of the crop—or at least, some near approximation—was duly sent to town by ox cart the next day. If they insisted on coming themselves, there was nothing but problems: someone, they would hear, must have snuck out and harvested their cornfield at night; the beans were ruined, half the rice had disappeared and the man in charge was not at home; there were endless run-arounds, accidents, excuses. Those who persisted began to encounter hints of sorcery: strange objects appearing in the fields, snakes appearing in their houses . . . It wasn't so much the crops they were concerned about, said Narcisse

(Miadana's son), what they were really afraid of was the possibility of *andriana* returning and taking back their land.

Rahoby, the engineer, had begun driving up to Betafo fairly regularly after his brother's death; when he was overseas, his wife would come instead. Sometimes they would even stay overnight. It was around this time that Rahoby devised the project of rebuilding his family's mansion in Atsimonkady, and started coming once or twice a month to see how work was progressing, and to inspect his fields. Rumor had it he was thinking of retiring to Betafo, with some of his family—at least part time. Then suddenly, work stopped. Somehow, he had been intimidated. After that, neither Rahoby nor his wife ever stayed overnight in Betafo again; they didn't even come to investigate when their crops started disappearing.

Claude's return, then, was the very thing Betafo's *mainty* residents had been trying to prevent. And their first major problems began even before they moved to Betafo, when they started trying to take control of some of their own fields previously sharecropped by the *mainty* contractors from Andrianony. The first was one that had previously been worked by Norbert. They hired a workman from Arivonimamo to do the hard work of preparing the soil for transplanting. Within a matter of days, he fell ill and had to be replaced. They hired another. He finished digging up about a third of it when his son in Arivonimamo also became ill; the next day, he arrived for work only to confront a strange snake staring at him from the middle of the field and left, refusing to return. "And we'd already paid the whole of his salary," Miadana complained, "so there was nothing we could do." It was only after they had hired a third workman and paid the salary all over again that the field was made ready for planting, and in a state where the family could handle it themselves.

No one in the family had any doubt that Norbert (or his wife) had something to do with this. And it was intimidation of this sort, combined with endless stalling strategies and shuffling of papers, complicated legal arguments made in the knowledge that there was no judicial apparatus to appeal to in order to enforce property claims, that were responsible for the fact that, even when I knew them, the family had still not been able to take control of all of the fields registered in their mother's name. Those worked by Augustin were especially difficult to get their hands on.

Aside from Claude's ulcer, the family insisted, they had never had serious health problems while still living in the capital. Since they had been living in

the country, they had been falling sick continually. This wasn't just envy, Narcisse insisted. It wasn't even just intimidation. It had become a way of establishing authority. Black people bewitched white ones so the white people would be in constant distress. That way they have to come to them as suppliants (*tsy maintsy mangataka any aminy*). After all, just about all curers were descendants of slaves, and patient-curer relation is one of great hierarchical formality: one must beg their help, treat them like an aged father, not to mention follow their instructions and allow them to impose taboos. By ensuring that his family ended up constant suppliants at Ratsizafy's door, Narcisse was saying, they were once again attempting to reverse their former relationship.

When they first arrived, Ratsizafy had been one of the first to welcome Miadana's family back to Betafo. He told Claude's mother that he had always considered himself a friend of the family: her own father had once been among his "fosterlings."[6] At the time, his reputation was just beginning to flower, he was already beginning to attract wealthy clients from the city—people just like Miadana, in fact—aside from his regular *andriana* clients from Betafo, and he was clearly hoping they too would submit themselves to his paternalistic care and protection.

At first this did not seem impossible. The family was soon regular visitors at Ratsizafy's house in Morafeno as one after another their children fell ill, and the doctors in the clinic at Arivonimamo seemed entirely incompetent to cure them. The first was their daughter Nivo, then thirteen or fourteen, who developed fevers and strange rashes on her legs. Ratsizafy told them that the former caretaker had dropped something in their water pot.[7] He gave them herbal medicine, and the condition went away.

As time went on, however, the relationship grew more strained. Part of the problem was that while Miadana's family would always come to Ratsizafy for medical problems, they never consulted him about anything else. They never became real clients. But part, too, was the fact that Ratsizafy was beginning to sour on the local *andriana* in general; he was spending more time with wealthy clients from the city who had nothing to do with local politics, but who paid a lot of money. Miadana was convinced he began to milk her family for cash: when someone got sick, he would give them something to clear up their symptoms, but never provide a definitive cure, so they would be back again every month paying the same fee over and over. Finally, she said, after a younger daughter had been wracked by periodic fevers for most of a year, she had to go

and claim poverty—"really, father, I really don't have a penny left"—and beg him to help them anyway, whereon he gave them something that cured the disease entirely, and it never returned again.

It seems to have been around this time they began hypothesizing that it was really Ratsizafy's friends who were responsible for their falling sick to begin with—and not, as he would usually suggest, *andriana* relatives.

Finally, the demands Ratsizafy imposed along with his cures grew more and more absurd. The last time they had come to him for a cure, Miadana told me, was a year before I arrived; it was Miadana herself this time who was sick. He consulted his spirits, playing the *valiha* and staring through a bottle full of water, determined the cause and culprit, and finally, scraped away at several pieces of wood and presented them with the powder. This powder, he said, must be taken with water—but not just any water. The water had to be gathered from seven different springs, which he carefully specified: each was on the top of a different hill or mountain around Arivonimamo. It also had to be gathered in a single day. After that, seven *tsingala* had to be added to the water. *Tsingala* is the name for a species of long-legged insects that skate on the surface of the water in ponds and rice fields: they are notoriously quick, darting instantaneously back and forth between the water lilies. Miadana described with great amusement how they ran panting from hill to hill before setting out to catch the insects, armed with an old plastic yogurt cup; after about three hours, they had managed to catch just one. Seven? she said. This is ridiculous. There's no way they were going to catch seven. They went off to find another curer—Dada Leva in Kianja, who managed to solve the problem with a simple fumigation.

Ratsizafy, some told me, was known to be fond of practical jokes.[8]

Since then the family had not been back. When Miadana was struck by *ambalavelona* six months later—she began having delusional fits where she would pretend to eat but not actually put food in her mouth, then act like her children were insane when they told her what she had been doing; classic symptoms of being possessed by an evil ghost—they didn't even think of consulting Ratsizafy. They went to a spirit medium in town.

Entanglements

"We were used to the life of the capital," Miadana and her family kept telling me, in talking about their first experiences in Betafo, "what did we know?" It

was a somewhat plaintive refrain—they were clearly embarrassed, now that they knew just how arrogant some of their initial behavior must have seemed.

Andrianony, the *mainty* quarter, was made up of three large families.[9] The only one they really got on well with from the start was Armand's—mainly because Armand himself always made a point of being friendly to Miadana and Claude, with whom he felt something of an affinity. At first glance, this might seem surprising. Armand had grown up the grandson of slaves; much his youth was spent doing the most demeaning manual labor; he had worked his way through college; now, he doubled as enterprising businessman and revolutionary cadre, a dedicated member of the "Trotskyite" MFM—then the party most devoted to the possibility of a radical transformation of Malagasy society.[10] In comparison, Miadana and her family were people who, had they been from the United States, would have been considered classic liberals. They were born to comfortable surroundings and privileged access to education, but they had also thoroughly internalized the universalistic principles on which that education was based, particularly, the ideal of enlightened tolerance which—for all that one might argue it was ultimately rooted in a presumption of superiority—was nonetheless perfectly sincere. To many, they seemed mirror images: of all the black people of Betafo, none had risen so far so fast as had Armand; of all the *andriana*, none had so quickly fallen low. But as people, they shared much the same set of categories. Even more, they shared a belief in social progress, which in practice came down at least to the notion that hatreds and divisions born of past inequalities could and would be gradually surmounted by trying to build a more reasonable society. If nothing else, they could agree that discrimination, racism[11] was a bad thing and that any decent person should actively oppose it.

Armand's family generally followed his lead, but the other two families were much more suspicious. One was headed by Augustin;[12] the other, by the ancient Ingahirainy, most of whose descendants they found to be especially insular, closed, suspicious, and impossible to befriend. Much of this tension clearly had to do with land; before the family's arrival, both Augustin and Ingahirainy's oldest son Norbert had been working fields owned by Claude's mother, which they soon took back to work themselves. But most of the inhabitants of Andrianony also considered the newcomers extraordinarily arrogant and presumptuous; they saw their overt protestations about wanting to treat everyone as equals belied by a thousand unspoken messages—habits of

dress, styles of speech, or even posture—which, in a social milieu so attuned to unspoken messages, seemed like intentional affronts.

It might help to recall the image of the ancient aristocracy of *tampon-tanana,* the "great *andriana*" who Miadana's family and other absentees were assumed to represent. This was not simply a distant, mythologized image of silk-robed noblemen and women in tiaras; every few years, Betafo would be suddenly, briefly flooded by their modern incarnations. Every year, of course, representatives of the "great *andriana*" families would arrive to collect their crops, but these were only a few and they could mostly be confined to Arivonimamo; they only really came in force when one of them was to be buried.[13] In September 1989, for instance, Rahoby died in Paris—his body was flown back to Antananarivo to be deposited next to his brother in the *Telo Milahatra.* That one day, the village of Betafo was entirely transformed. Every wide path or open space was packed with cars and rented vans, everywhere around the tomb were knots of grave-looking men in three-piece suits with bulky expensive watches, ladies in silk dresses, pearls, gold and silver jewelry. There were several hundred of them in all. Most were not descendants of Betafo; they were friends of the family, but these were some of Madagascar's most prosperous people, making a calculated show of their magnificence. It certainly seemed dazzling to me, compared to what I was used to. One should bear in mind here that many rural people went around on a daily basis in shirts and dresses halfway ripped apart, sometimes literally hanging in shreds across their backs, even their Sunday best was usually no more than, for men, a Malabary—a long plaid over-shirt—and for women, jackets and simple cotton dresses. From their perspective, this was unimaginable luxury.

The previous inhabitants of *tampon-tanana,* Raoelizaka and Sely, had intentionally tried to identify themselves with this image of luxury—and by extension, with the ancient aristocrats themselves. Sely, for example, was famous for always wearing shoes where most people walked barefoot or in sandals; frequently wearing formal attire, his shirt and pants always clean and pressed with a charcoal iron. In a rural context this was more than anything a comment about the control of other people's labor: Sely alone did not have to descend into the mud, but hired laborers; he alone of the residents had a full-time *mainty* servant to wash and press his clothes. With such a neighbor, Miadana's family must have assumed that if they, real representatives of the great *andriana*, made a point of wearing simple clothes and getting their feet dirty digging their own fields, everyone would realize they did not mean to put on airs.

There were a few, I found, who did respect their efforts; for some inhabitants of Andrianony, however, the family was so completely identified with the former masters of Betafo that the gestures were seen as a form of condescension in themselves; and perhaps because they were putting themselves on the same level, every small accouterment—a nice pair of sandals, pressed trousers, an expansive and confident walk—could be seen as an assertion of superiority, something rubbed in their faces.

Shortly after they moved in, said Miadana, she decided it would be nice to brighten up *tampon-tanana* by planting flowers. They decided to make it a collective project. Their children helped rally a number of others, from Andrianony, who brought spades from their own houses. Within a little while, however, Norbert got wind of this, and arrived to order his family's children home.

> Miadana: . . . he told them "Don't do the Andriana's work for them!" Then he came up to us—we hadn't been giving anybody orders—and I asked him why he was doing that; I said, "Look, there's no discrimination here; we're all just people who live together in one place." So he sat down and told us a story: "Your grandfather's father had a man thrown in the pigsty because that man had lost his pigs. Our grandfather. He had our grandfather tied up and thrown in the pigsty when he went off looking for the pigs, threw him pigs' slops to eat, and he left him in there until he found the pigs."
>
> I was embarrassed, and frightened too, because he was saying "don't do the *andriana*'s work for them, let the *andriana* have to act like slaves!" I was amazed because the thing was so completely unexpected. And then he told the story. After a little while we tried to talk to him: "That wasn't our doing," we said, "but something that happened long ago. We're not the ones responsible for it . . ."

Apparently though, not to very much avail. Most of Norbert's family wanted nothing to do with hers; they resisted every effort she could make to open them up and try to convince them she wanted to get along. Every time they tried to start a conversation, it was: "What are you anyway?" they said. "You're the descendants of the man who used to put people in the pigsty."[14]

Norbert was, as I've pointed out, unusual, but his family largely followed him, and such incidents set the tenor of expectations in which Miadana's family's acts of self-presentation were received. Within the framework of historical injustice, new shoes took on a new meaning; feelings of envy, suspicion, and desire twisted around each other to create a triangle of resentment between Norbert, his wife Juliette, and Miadana herself.

It took a while for them to notice. But every time Miadana appeared wearing elegant-looking shoes, or a new dress, or carrying a parasol, within a few

days, Juliette would appear in something similar. Apparently she was putting intense pressure on her husband, who was not a wealthy man (he spent much of his time—especially in winter—away from Betafo peddling ironware). Now, he was expected to finance Juliette's rivalry. The solution seemed obvious: I have already described how such rivalries were assumed to end up becoming mediated by sexual intrigue. Anyway, this was the form of mediation that seemed most appealing to Norbert. If Miadana was serious about not wanting to be haughty[15]—not wanting to place herself above the community—then she could prove it. Miadana was not prepared to go that far.

Shortly thereafter came the public reverberation. It started with a quarrel between children. Here's how Miadana told the story to Ramanana (Irina's mother):

> Miadana: It was Sunday. Back then I wasn't going to church in Betafo yet, I was still going to church in Arivonimamo. And I told Nivo to go for water, "Go fetch some water for when we put on the rice." We still didn't have water in our own well. Here's what happened. Here's Nivo coming back with her bucket: "Not again mother! I'm not going back there to get water any more!"
>
> "But what's the matter?"
>
> "I'm not going back for water until Norbert's daughter goes back home." . . .
>
> It was the children who overheard it all. They were on their way to the east of the village, and they had just got past Perline's house [in Avarakady], when they saw them there below the house. There were the two of them, Norbert's oldest daughter and Nivo, standing there, arguing. They both had pails of water. And one was saying, "If you're *andriana*, why aren't you living in the Rova?" [the palace in Antananarivo.]
>
> "Let's not start talking about each other's ancestors."
>
> Ah, but Norbert and Ranaivo the Bolt were talking to each other up in Perline's window above them; the children didn't see them there. This is what she said: "If you had what it takes, you'd still be living in the Rova in Antananarivo, so how come you're coming down here to the countryside?"
>
> But "Don't let's start talking about each other's ancestors, I say!"
>
> But the other told my girl here, "If you want to be fat like I am," (because she's really fat, you know) "let's see you eat ten canisters of rice."
>
> Then this little girl here, she says: "Give me ten canisters of rice, then. It'll only be rice you got from our grandmother's fields." And that's true, too. "It's Mom's rice fields anyway that are making you so fat!"
>
> "If you want to fight with me, then eat ten canisters of rice!"
>
> And then she said: "Don't bother me," she said, "because this is what I'll have you know: you're nothing but our ancestors' slaves!"
>
> Norbert's daughter suddenly looked upward—maybe she saw her father up above. Then she took off. Nivo was surprised to see her go so abruptly; she had no idea what made her run off like that.
>
> Then she headed straight off back here complain to me: "I'm not going to

> get water there any more, Mother." Soon after, Norbert appears and says: "so I suppose that's your water there to the east of the village? It's our ancestors who made that spring! You don't need to get water there any more, you can go get it to the south of the village." He was telling us it was forbidden: "You aren't allowed to go there any more."
>
> We didn't answer, we just . . .
>
> CLAUDE: But what really amazed me at the time was the way he showed up the next morning, trying to make a scene.
>
> MIADANA: We really didn't argue. We just listened. But this is what he was saying: "Send your children out here in the yard so I can beat them! Come out and fight! Whoever loses gets a beating!" (Bad words he was using too. Tsk tsk tsk.) "If you don't want to be cows, then come out and fight me! If you're not little dogs I say then come out and fight me in the yard!"
>
> "Oh, go home" I said. He's trying to start some kind of fight there in the yard.
>
> "As for your kids," he says, "whoever stands tallest I say will be the one to take a fall. And you had better watch out: you'd better not come back there any more. Maybe that's why they say you on *tampon-tanana* used to spit on everyone—maybe in the past it was you who bested everyone around you, but this time it'll be you who'll be the losers!"

For three months after that, before they got their own well working, it was very difficult to get water. Norbert had threatened to chase off any of their children he found there, even when he was out of town, they weren't going to challenge him. But there were no easily accessible springs nearby. Miadana concluded:

> MIADANA: It was like that at the start of the . . . he wanted to start a fight, to make clear that there were definitely two camps. The whole thing cast a shadow, because . . . I guess it may well be true that they were our ancestor's slaves—I mean, I don't actually know if it's true . . .
>
> CLAUDE: Oh, of course it's true.
>
> MIADANA: So that's what happened. We haven't gotten along ever since. Now if we meet them on the path, we don't even exchange greetings any more.

This story is framed so as to make Norbert seem the very antithesis of a responsible adult. Children are egocentric and contentious; it was inevitable that they would have their petty spats; the essence of legitimate authority was the ability to tell them not to, and above all, to ensure childish contests do not lead to more lasting, divisive effects. Two teenage girls fighting at the spring is not much of a scandal. Under normal circumstances, their parents would admonish them a little and the matter would be closed. A lot of everyday gossip in Betafo was in fact concerned with squabbles between children, and efforts to patch them up. For a father to instead take up the battle as his own, let

alone to pick a fight with teenagers, shouting insults, imposing restrictions, actively trying to divide the community into two camps, was the very essence of pig-headed stupidity.

Of course, Norbert was already notorious for this sort of thing. Other black people from Betafo clearly found his behavior embarrassing; Armand in particular seemed exasperated by it: "Norbert," he said, "just can't get over the fact of slavery" (*tsy mahazaka ny fanandezovina*). At one point he even called him a racist, but mostly, he didn't want to talk about the matter. On the other hand, Norbert was ultimately quite effective in dividing the community into camps. He had it known that he did not want to see members of Miadana's family using the same spring; he didn't even want them passing by his house; no one in the family intervened to admonish him;[16] in fact, the incident put an end to even what little relations the two families previously had. Members of Armand's family were frequent visitors to *tampon-tanana;* members of Augustin's came by occasionally; most of Norbert's refused to even use the path that lead past—though not all of them. There were some significant exceptions.

At this time, Miadana's daughter Haingo was still living in Arivonimamo, attending high school, a school also attended by Norbert's oldest son Soanaivo. Haingo was a very attractive young woman, but unlike most of her sisters and brothers, was beginning to find school intensely boring. She and Soanaivo fell in love; within a year, she was pregnant. This is the kind of situation that puts abstract principles of tolerance to the test, and it must be said that Miadana and Claude did not hesitate; from the beginning, they were more than willing to treat Norbert's son as theirs. They had no objections to their daughter marrying a descendant of their former slaves. On the other hand, such a marriage was hardly going to improve relations with Norbert. Soanaivo was one of Norbert's sons from his first marriage,[17] the ones he had disinherited on marrying Juliette, and who lingered, poor and helpless, in an apartment on the first floor of Norbert's house in Andrianony.

Relatively few people in Imerina have church weddings, and even fewer have their marriages officially registered, since it is extremely expensive and difficult to get a legal divorce. For a rural person, a marriage is legitimate if the *vody ondry* has been paid—a fairly modest sum of money presented by the suitor's family to that of the prospective bride. What's really important, even more than the money, is the ceremony of presentation, in which the suitor's representatives make flowery speeches explaining that the money is a token of

request for the woman's family's *tsodrano,* their blessing for the marriage. It is a ceremony in which the wife-givers are treated as in every way superior; one man told me that, in former times, the suitors' delegation had to literally crawl on their bellies up to the house. Since Norbert was Soanaivo's father, it would normally be his responsibility to lead the delegation that asked for Haingo's hand. But Norbert was not about to crawl on his belly before the *andriana* in any sense, literally or figuratively; he was not about to go begging (*mangataka*), even if it meant his son's marriage would not be legitimate.

Haingo moved in downstairs with Soanaivo. Shortly thereafter a baby boy was born. Particularly after Miadana herself had spurned him, Soanaivo's marriage to Miadana's beautiful daughter must have been one of the most annoying turns of events he could possibly imagine. It must have irked him all the more because as soon as they were married, Claude and Miadana transferred control of several large fields to the east of the village to their son-in-law and his brother, Little Jean, including the ones that had once been sharecropped by Norbert.

A month or so later, Miadana said Norbert appeared at their door, and, as curtly as he could, asked if the two could give him their blessing. Miadana immediately went off to get her husband; they took some water and leaves and performed a brief benediction. When it was over, he thanked them uncomfortably and left.

The End

Rahoby's funeral was itself a little contest of power. He had died, remember, in France, where he had been consulting on some engineering project; his devastated family immediately began plans to have the body flown home and placed in his ancestral tomb, the *Telo Milahatra.* Augustin was the caretaker for that tomb so he was the first to receive word about Rahoby's death. The body was to be flown in on a Monday, he was told; the mourners were going to hold the usual vigil over the corpse that night, then conduct it to Betafo for burial on Tuesday afternoon. Augustin immediately consulted Ratsizafy for astrological advice, and Ratsizafy, sure enough, determined that this would not do at all. There was no appropriate time for opening the tomb until Thursday: if they wished to avoid disaster, the mourners would have to wait. The chief mourners (Rahoby's widow and his son) decided this was ridiculous—no one could be expected to sit over a corpse for three whole

days—they were going to bury it on Tuesday no matter what Ratsizafy said. That afternoon, as the wealthy elite descended on Betafo, while most of Betafo's inhabitants were shut up in their houses, ceding the village to them, Augustin and Ratsizafy remained a conspicuous presence, consulting in Andrianony across the moat from the tomb, messengers shunting back and forth as they negotiated with the funeral party. Apparently, in this case, their efforts to use ritual power to impose on the *andriana* came to nothing; the *andriana* simply ignored them. On the other hand, the other striking thing on this occasion was Claude, who appeared once or twice to greet friends and relatives, but otherwise had little to do with the ceremony. While his wife was padding around *tampon-tanana* wrapped in her old crazy-quilt blanket, which was her everyday informal wear when it was cold, he appeared in the most ragged clothes I had ever seen him in: battered gray trousers, a dirty brown-and-yellow Malabary, his head covered in a simple wool cap of the sort which, to city people, was practically emblematic of a peasant. He was making it clear to everyone that he was so determined not to associate himself with his wealthy cousins that he was willing to make himself ridiculous in their eyes.

It's hard to say how much of an impression this sort of gesture made. Most of their neighbors, I think, did not really considered Claude a genuine member of the community for the simple reason that they assumed he would get out soon as he had a chance. A week after the funeral, for example, I caught him in the taxi-stand in Arivonimamo dressed in a very nicely turned three-piece suit, hurrying off to a government office in the hope of renewing his expired pension, and possibly, of finding a position for his eldest son, Dami. His main concern when I knew him was to ensure that the children all finished high school, and had access to further education; one of them would certainly land a government position within the next few years, and when they did, the family would have a cash income again, and they would presumably start thinking of moving to the capital.[18] On the other hand, Haingo's marriage provided at least the possibility of a more permanent presence. Of course, she and Soanaivo might well leave Betafo too, eventually, but it is quite easy to imagine them staying on, perhaps moving into the house on *tampon-tanana,* looking after the fields, becoming the new mediators between the great families and the descendants of their former slaves. There is no way to know for sure.

In the meantime, Miadana had more or less taken over the local Protestant church. The last pastor[19] had retired two years before and there was no official

replacement, but Miadana was pastor in all but name. What she was really noted for was teaching Sunday school. This was what Nety, Armand's wife, told me about her the first time I talked to her about Miadana. There are some *olona hafahafa saina,* people with twisted minds, in Andrianony who still won't have anything to do with her, she said, but she's made up for it by trying to teach tolerance to their children. Sunday school had become enormously popular among the children of Andrianony (and I must say that anyone who was that good a storyteller must have made an exceptionally entertaining teacher)—take Andry, she said, pointing to her four-year-old son, he would throw a total tantrum if I told him even for one Sunday that he couldn't go. Andry looked noncommittal, then giggled and ran away.

It seemed the logical solution, from Miadana's point of view. Conflicts often percolated upward from petty spats between children; liberal that she was, she was trying to do the opposite, to bring people together from the bottom up, through universalistic education. Since it was cast in a Christian idiom, it was hardly something anyone's parents felt they could order their children to stay away from—the church was considered something one could ignore, but not actively oppose.

LOST PEOPLE

8

> As to the miseries which these continual wars brought to the provincial people, that is indescribable, for by fighting, but more deceit, that is, the offer of life and pardon if they yield and submit, thousands and thousands have thus been murdered in cold blood, and their numerous wives, children, and cattle seized and reduced to slavery.
>
> Mothers are separated from their tender offspring and other relations, as they are divided and distributed amongst different masters, and are thus taken into different parts of the country where they never discover one another again, with very few exceptions.
>
> An officer who is a real Christian informed me that the pains in hell could not be more than the pains suffered by these unfortunate people in being separated from one another to be taken away to their different masters. Their cries, their weepings and their lamentations, said the above Christian, is such as almost sufficient to raise the dead from their graves for to take their parts . . . (Raombana's "Annals," A2, no5: p74 [693–696])

So wrote Raombana, secretary to Queen Ranavalona I, around 1855, in a history which he wrote in English so that no one else at court could read it.

For its victims, brought as captives to be sold in markets in Imerina, the very first thing slavery meant was a complete rupture of the ties of love, kinship, and shared experience that had bound them to a home, to parents, friends, lovers, everything and everyone they had most cared for in their lives. Even when it was not brought about by wholesale mass murder—which it usually was—enslavement meant being ripped away from all of the objects that made life meaningful. It was first and foremost a loss of human relationships, but people at the time tended to speak of it as a loss of place. Slaves were "lost people" (*olona very*), wrenched from their ancestral lands, in an alien place among people who did not know them.

Even those born as slaves in Imerina found it extremely difficult to create

enduring ties to people or to places. Slaves were always the most mobile part of the population. Few lived with their masters. Most did not even live in the same settlements: free men and women lived in towns or villages on high ground; slaves, in makeshift hamlets in the valley bottoms, near the paddy fields. One astrologer told me the reason people tend to shun low places nowadays was for fear of *lolo.* At night, ghosts travel through low places; they tend to follow the current of moving water, to flow along the damp bottoms of the valleys or sweep through the depths of moats. If so, slaves were exiled to confused tumultuous places full of chaotic memories and intentions, dislocated powers. But even in such places, few established themselves long.

Most hamlets were structured around a handful of older men or women; most younger slaves had no fixed abode at all but circulated between several hamlets in different parts of Imerina, often between different masters, as well as between scattered family, lovers, and friends. They made up most of a murky, commercial, semi-criminal underworld whose inhabitants were considered intrinsically suspicious because of their very mobility. Slaves dominated petty commerce. They also made up the vast majority of burglars and highwaymen. This mobility made it easier to slip away from their owners' claims on them, but it also ensured their uprooted condition remained permanent. I never found anyone, for instance, able to tell me how slaves were buried. The little I could glean suggested most had to make do with makeshift tombs—sometimes little more than covered pits—near their settlements. Almost always men and women of very different ancestries were buried together. It was only in the decades after liberation that some families were able to begin pooling their resources to create solid and substantial tombs.

Most of the slaves emancipated in 1896 abandoned these hamlets: either returning to their ancestral homes (if those places existed and they still remembered them), founding new villages, or moving off to town. Those who stayed on were almost always encouraged to do so by gifts of land. Remember that most rural communities like Betafo were dominated by a relatively small elite of wealthy families. After the French conquest, the children of these families largely abandoned the countryside, becoming doctors, engineers, or minor officials in the capital. Most, however, continued to be buried on their former ancestral lands, and to do so, they had to maintain land there. Most chose a few responsible, middle-aged men from among their former chattels and offered them gifts of land, on the understanding that they would also work for them as sharecroppers.[1]

For others, winning access to productive land was an insuperable problem. White people would not sell it to them (their ancestors forbade it), or if they did, only for vastly inflated prices. In Betafo most *mainty* families traced their presence back to some financial windfall: if not a gift of land, then a military pension,[2] an ancestor who married a local heiress . . .[3] When one managed to win a foothold, kin were soon to follow, looking for similar opportunities. Occasionally, this could lead to a kind of white flight: the more the children of the *mainty* prospered, the more the children of the *fotsy* would move out. To the northeast of Betafo were several villages whose white inhabitants had ultimately abandoned them entirely. But such cases were unusual.

The desire for land was not simply economic. Farming was not all that lucrative. Nor did former slaves seek land in order to escape a life of wage labor—most, in fact, continued to engage in wage labor even after they acquired land. The desire for land was first and foremost a desire to create a place for one's descendants. Once there was land to pass on to one's children, one could begin to think about a tomb. In Betafo, the first substantial *mainty* tombs—ones built on hilltops, rather than in the valleys—were constructed in the first two decades of this century. Building tombs was extremely expensive; in most cases several families had to pool their resources in order to be able to afford to build one. It is hard to imagine how many schemes, struggles, and how much monotonous, grinding labor must lie behind these simple structures of earth and stone—structures which represented the possibility of a permanent place for their descendants, that their names might be remembered after they had died.

As one might well imagine, all this ensured that tombs and the practices surrounding them took on a rather different meaning for black people than they did for white. Ancestors were not felt to be nearly such a constraint for those who were struggling to find a solid place; history was not such a burden for those who'd had theirs stolen.

According to any conventional anthropological definition, black and white people shared a common culture. The language they spoke was identical. There was no substantial difference in marriage customs, clothing, use of deferential speech forms, the kind of music each enjoyed. Certainly I never heard anyone refer to *mainty* customs.[4] What made the two groups different was a difference in historical experience.

The existence of slavery was, certainly, central to how white people saw themselves in history. For them, the scene with which I began this chapter—in which rifle-bearing Merina soldiers rip families apart—could almost be

considered a moment of original sin. Such scenes, endlessly repeated, ended up creating a population of hundreds of thousands of lost people who have remained among them ever since, a kind of permanent accusation. After the defeat of the Merina army at the hands of the French, however, images of soldiers and victims began to merge together in the popular imagination, until the word "soldier" became an emblem for the moral perils involved in any relation of command. Now, in a way, one could say this is a very insightful conclusion. If what one is trying to do is to understand how such endlessly repeated acts of treachery, mass murder, and destruction had been possible, the existence of structures of command in which individuals completely abandon their autonomy of judgment and subordinate themselves to another is just the place to look. Obviously, we are not talking about an explicit theory; it was more of a deeply felt, but only vaguely formulated suspicion of certain types of possible social relation. Still, it resonated throughout almost every reflection on history, and contributed to a much larger sense that the past was somehow laced with violence, that it was a terrible constraint on living human beings.

For the descendants of the victims, history looked very different. Like wage labor, relations of command were considered the inevitable result of poverty—so much so that many black people would hire and be hired by their own close relatives. Attitudes toward ancestors were also rather different. Ironically enough, many *olona mainty*—especially male heads of household—appeared to genuinely accept the very ideal of benevolent ancestral authority that for most white people often seemed more an uneasily maintained facade.

All this comes much more clearly into focus when one looks at the history of particular families. The most dramatic contrast in the family histories that follow is between those families that actually did manage to secure a toehold, and ultimately, to turn Betafo into their ancestral land, and those who were permanently set adrift, and whose histories turned into stories of endless dissolution and displacement; a kaleidoscope of images that always centered on the murky figure of the *Vazimba*.

Antandrok'omby

Two of Betafo's three most prominent *mainty* lineages hark back to a tiny settlement called Antandrok'omby, now long since abandoned, on a spur of land near the rice fields to the north of Antanety. Early colonial records suggest that together, three noble families probably owned about half the rice fields

immediately surrounding Betafo—including all the land surrounding Antandrok'omby, and the vast majority of that hamlet's slaves. After emancipation, the leaders of these families appear to have chosen two of its prominent men and granted them the entire stretch of valley. These, then, were the "good and faithful servants" Ramanana referred to in chapter 6, the trustworthy slaves who had not strayed too far from their masters, and were granted land and a place in the community as a reward for their years of mending walls, fetching firewood, and carrying manure—and as assurance they would continue to do so in the future.

Their names—Rainizanabohitra (b. c. 1870) and Rainimananandro (b. 1872)—were still remembered by just about everyone in Betafo, because each is now Great Ancestor of a prominent lineage.[5]

The first appears to have converted to Catholicism—anyway, most of his descendants are Catholic today. In 1916, shortly after his death, his widow joined together with several friends and relatives to build a tomb on the ridge above their hamlet, called Ambohimasina. Two years later the other man, a Protestant, contracted to have a tomb of his own built at a place called Ambohitrimaninana, further east along that same high ridge.[6]

1918 was also the year that Antandrok'omby was abandoned (for fear of bandits, I was told). Most of its population took refuge in Andrianony, the quarter of Betafo where most of its *mainty* population already lived. Rainizanabohitra's descendants, the Catholics, all moved out again in 1935, to the newly founded village of Antanety, on the high ridge above where their ancient hamlet used to be, and there they remained when I knew them, a population of roughly sixty people in eleven houses.[7] Rainimananandro's descendants were, at that time, still living in Andrianony. In fact, Rainimananandro's son Ingahirainy[8] was still alive.

While Rainizanabohitra's wealth was quickly divided up among four daughters, Ingahirainy was his father's only son, and as a result he quickly became one of the wealthier men in Betafo—certainly the wealthiest of its *mainty* inhabitants. He has managed to collect a very large family around him. In his own house—placed as is appropriate to the north and east of those of his descendants—live his wife and her childless brother, nearby are two large houses owned by his eldest son, Norbert, and while I was there, work had just begun on building a new, huge, brick house for his younger son, Martin, recently posted as a math teacher in the public high school in Arivonimamo. Three more houses clustered around them were occupied by daughters or

grandchildren. All in all it was the largest single family in Betafo: seven households, all descended from one man. Not surprising that he was also the one man who everyone in Betafo, black or white, was willing to consider a genuine, bona fide *Ray amandReny*.

It's interesting to note that members of these two relatively successful lineages had little to say about their history. Their ancestors were people who grew rice, married, built tombs, had descendants, moved a bit from place to place. It is also interesting that, while Ingahirainy's descendants owed their position to having been considered the most faithful and trusty of the *andriana*'s ancient servants, they were now considered among the most bitter and suspicious of Betafo's black population—we have already heard about Norbert's relations with Miadana. The paradox is nicely revealed by the two little snippets of history I did manage to tease out of them. One I was told by Norbert himself. The reason his family found refuge in Andrianony, he said, was because of the love between his grandfather and a simple *andriana* farmer named Rajaonera. Worried about the danger of bandits, Rajaonera had convinced his friend to abandon the old hamlet in Antandrok'omby, and helped build a new house for him in Andrianony, directly adjoining his own. Later, the two men sealed their friendship with a ritual of blood brotherhood.[9] This is a story members of the family always cited, publicly, to describe their past relations with *andriana*. On the other hand, this history had a hidden underside: because this was also the family who, after Norbert's quarrel with Miadana, constantly reminded her of their ancestor (Rainimanandro himelf? His father?) who had been tied up and thrown among the pigs. It was a token of the success of the family, one might say, that the history was itself so uninteresting: it took something very much like the form of the official *andriana* histories, a placid façade with all the elements of conflict and violence carefully hidden away.

The Story of Rakotovoalavo (Rakoto the Rat)

The story of Rakotovoalavo and his brother Rainilaimiza—two slaves who also remained behind in Betafo after liberation in 1895, and who stand at the head of another major *mainty* lineage—is much less uneventful. Here, the violence is foundational. As remembered now, the story centers on one shocking event: a brutal murder, committed, in Betafo, in 1901. Rakoto the Rat's story is particularly dramatic because it has come to embody the limits of possibility

for former slaves; he was a man who came very near to transcending the agrarian world altogether, by the same path as the sons and daughters of the wealthiest slaveholders took—by establishing himself among the educated colonial elite. In the end, he was brutally stymied.

The story begins with a woman named Black Rangory, a slave apparently, but one of an unusually high status. She might have been a local woman who been sold into bondage because of her parents' debts or crimes.[10] She appears to have been owned by a resident of Avarakady, a relatively modest *andriana* farmer named Rakotondrainibe, but unlike most slaves, she and her two sons actually lived with their master. They apparently had some money, too, since according to AKTA records, Rangory bought a paddy field in the adjoining valley in 1893: the price was twenty dollars, an enormous sum of money for a plot of land, larger than most ordinary sales by a factor of ten.[11] Even more unusual was the fact that her eldest son Rakoto the Rat (b. 1872) was by 1880 already a registered student in the Protestant mission school.[12] It was extremely rare for the children of slaves to be allowed to attend primary school, particularly in rural parishes. In Betafo, Rakoto may well have been the only one. Perhaps he had an unusually indulgent master, or his mother had greater influence than most, but by all accounts, he was a brilliant student.

Rakoto the Rat never had any children, and he is not buried in Betafo. The only reason anyone still remembers him is because in 1901 he murdered his former teacher, Ralaitsivery. I have already alluded to this story in chapter 5. For some, particularly amongst the *andriana*, this murder is seen as the defining moment of the history of Betafo. Ranaivo Karetsaka (Ranaivo the Bolt), who though seldom in Betafo is the head of the one *andriana* family that still remains in Avarakady, seems to feel it is his particular duty to remind his fellow *andriana* that the murder took place, to tell the story as a kind of admonition, a way of inveighing against the evils of internecine hatreds that have, in his opinion, wracked and shattered Betafo ever since. Others claimed never to have heard the story—Armand, for example, seemed honestly surprised when I told it to him. Others, descended from Rainilaimiza, Rakoto the Rat's elder brother, undoubtedly knew a lot but guarded their council on the matter; to be honest, I didn't think it would be very nice to press them.

First, background:

Recall Ralaitsivery's history, which I sketched out in chapter 5. He was the eldest son of a captain in the Merina army, who had been made a kind of local constable when he retired. Ralaitsivery himself had gone in two or three

years from being the most promising student in Betafo's school to one of its three teachers. When Rakoto the Rat was a precocious *mainty* student in the school, Ralaitsivery was one of the men who taught him how to read. For almost twenty years, between 1878 and 1895, he was also the man who kept the local government accounts. When Madagascar became a French colony, Ralaitsivery did not receive an official post, instead he followed his younger brother Andriantonga, who was made *Goverena Madinka*, in charge of the *commune* that included Betafo, Kianja, and Andranovelona. He seems to have assumed he could continue to keep the books much as he always had, even without an official post. He also appears to have reinforced his authority by presiding over a revival of the *tangena*, the ancient poison ordeal that had been officially illegal since the time of Radama II (1861–1863). By this time, his former pupil was twenty-three, and apparently so renowned for his learning and so popular with the community that he was elected *mpiadidy*—in the colonial system, the rank immediately below *Governera Madinika*, a sort of local assistant responsible for Betafo itself.[13] While Ralaitsivery was capable of generosity to former slaves—at least, he was one of those who gave the Antandrok'omby men their land—he seems to have drawn the line at the idea of a slave being granted public office or any role in government. The fact that Rakoto the Rat could have an official title, and he could not, infuriated him.

For the rest of the story, I will simply reproduce Ranaivo the Bolt's account. Aside from a few dramatic details, there seems nothing in the story that is intrinsically implausible—in fact, I found many of the specifics confirmed by some very tattered French legal documents from 1902 that Miadana managed to find for me in a chest in her neighbor's attic.[14]

Ranaivo the Bolt, as I mentioned, seems to think of it as his role as elder in Betafo to remind the other *andriana* of what occurred. He rarely passed through town in 1990, and when on one occasion he was in, my friends on *tampon-tanana* quickly rushed me over to Avarakady, taking me up the winding stairs of the one tall house that now dominates the quarter, to a vast bedroom in the top floor. There he greeted me, a large wry man with something of the appearance of a Hollywood Roman senator, and almost immediately launched into his story. It never occurred to him that there would be anything else I would be interested in knowing from him:

> Ranaivo the Bolt: According to the elders that lived here, we were stubborn people and badly behaved. The sort of people who would push the weak out of the warm spot by the fire, who spoke without thinking. And there was a

functionary who once lived here, someone who did government business—from that part of town [pointing to *tampon-tanana*], who lived in that empty house there.

And there was another person of learning—a black person. When the French came in 1895, and all of Madagascar fell under the colonial regime, he was among those who had received education, who had learning, who the government enlisted to become officials and to carry out its affairs. Because in this town in which you live, many were the educated people enlisted to do government business.

And here too there was another educated person . . .

Miadana: Their names?

Ranaivo: Yes. There was one person in town who was murdered because he was savage, of a savage destiny, and he said things without thinking. His name was Ralaitsivery. And the one who murdered him: Rakoto the Rat. There was a certain Rasoavelo who lived here, the father of Ralaitsivery, and his wife was Rasoarivao. And his younger brother was named Ranaivo—Ranaivo Zandry. It was he who owned that abandoned compound to the south.

So later, another son of Rasoavelo, named Andriantonga, became the *Governera Madinika*. He was the younger brother of the person who was killed.

Miadana: Of Ralaitsivery?

Ranaivo: Ralaitsivery was the older one.

And there was a very educated man who became *mpiadidy*—because back then there used to be an office of *mpiadidy*. He was even more adept than the governor. And so the governor's elder brother was envious of him. He insulted the *mpiadidy*. Bad words, insults on his sister, insults on his mother, the kind of insults that put people to shame, the kind of insults you just don't use. So the one—the murderer, this is—would say "you shouldn't act like that, sir. It isn't right. We are people of the same ancestral lands, the same community, the same work for your brother. So don't act like that, it's not right." So "get out of here! get out of here I have nothing to say to you! get out of here because it's you who should shut up . . . What is this, this sister-fu . . . , this sis . . ." He used the worst possible kind of insults.[15]

So starting in 1901, the office that used to be here in Betafo during 1896, 1897, and 1898 moved to Andranovelona. It was in Andranovelona until the 31st December 1930. So the victim's elder brother went to Andranovelona, and the murderer also worked there, as he was the *mpiadidy*.

Miadana: This is to say he followed him there?

Ranaivo: He followed him there because it was government service, and one was *Governera Madinika* and the other *mpiadidy*. And the house of the one murdered was where Raoelizaka's house is now . . . There were four houses here [in Avarakady] and six houses to the west [on *tampon-tanana*]. The people were all trodding on each other's corns, with no space in between them. So everyone was just incredulous . . .

Miadana: Because everyone saw everything?

Ranaivo: Everyone saw everything. "Why does Ralaitsivery treat him like a dog? Why does Ralaitsivery insult him when there's nothing wrong he's done?" In the end, Rakoto the Rat decided he would murder him. For three years, he

had been constantly humiliated. And the murderer, he didn't answer back. He didn't say anything. He was mild-mannered. Well-behaved. Popular with the *fokon'olona.* Always good with his neighbors. The murderer.

This was a major scandal at the time, and something I can't help but know about because my parents really saw it—because the murderer lived right next to them, and the victim, right across that moat. The murderer said "I am hereby informing the elders and the *fokon'olona* that I have to go off on a journey." Really he was going off to hire some bandits to help him kill the man who had humiliated him. On Tuesday the 19th of December, 1903, the people were all replanting the rice—it was that time of year. The people were all off in the fields replanting; it was early evening, dusk. Rakoto the Rat arrives with four bandits. He happens to catch at home the man who humiliated him. And his father. But they didn't kill his father, they didn't do anything to him but just lifted him up gently. "Ingahibe, out of the house with you, Ingahibe." They carried him off to the east of the house.

Then, ti-pa! ti-pa! with rice pestles—it was rice pestles they used to kill him. From the bottom of his throat on up, there was nothing left to bury. Because they finished off his jaws with the pestles and smashed his brains. There was nothing left to bury because the things that had come out of his mouth were just too evil. Ti-pa! ti-pa! Smashed—they didn't stop, not one. His shoulder bones, his chest bones, his eight-bones as we say, were broken in a hundred places before they were through with him. His ribs, broken in a hundred places. The bones of his fingers, broken in a hundred places. His arm bones, broken in a hundred places. There was nothing to identify him by because it was all mashed into his back before they were through with him.

That is the evil history where you live; this is the kind of place in which you live.

Then, come the end of the month of December, 1903, the killer was caught, arrested and taken before the government. They held the trial in Faravohitra. The whole *fokon'olona* was called up. They interrogated them: "What was the reason?" So the *fokon'olona* said: "This was the reason: Ralaitsivery, the victim, had humiliated Rakoto the Rat. He had insulted him in the worst way, shameful insults, words, words . . . And Rakoto the Rat didn't answer back, he just went right off and killed him with a rice pestle."

"You all go home now," said the government.

Rakoto the Rat had been arrested, and then the decision came forth: life imprisonment. And Rakoto the Rat having been sentenced to life in prison, the *fokon'olona* went home.

That was . . . in 1904. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920 . . . eighteen years. On the 28th of October 1920 a letter came for his brother—down there, that's the house of the killer's older brother—and this was the writing on the address on the envelope because I looked at it like this [squints up close]—because the killer was sharp as a tack you know, whether in French or Malagasy or transcription—"Ingahy Rainilaimiza, resident of Andrianony, Betafo, canton Andranovelona, district of Arivonimamo, province of Antananarivo, Madagascar." And there was a big stamp on the envelope, which said "Guyane Française, South America."

"Such was the story then," said Ranaivo, at the end. "And now? Poo-a!" He turned and pretended to spit—poo-a! poo-a!, three times in an over-blown, comic-opera gesture which seemed only half self-mockery. Then, smiling:

> Ranaivo: Even now there's still some nasty shit down here. Theft, it's been done. Destroying other people's property out of spite, it's done. Bewitching, sorcery—it's done. There are *sisika,* needles placed under people's skins. [he laughs] But that was the first history from here.

One of the most striking things about this story is its extremely factual style. The account is full of numbers. Facts and figures become the medium through which the characters live their lives. But this in itself is quite accurate. It was. They were both men who lived their lives surrounded by printed textbooks, slates and rulers, ink bottles, leather-bound ledgers, blotting paper, loose-leaf binders filled with rafts of printed forms. Such were the reasons for their prominence. If it were not for these technologies of accuracy, they would not have been characters worth telling about. Of course, all this was not simply a way of evoking a milieu: the narrator, after all, went through the same educational system geared to producing petty bureaucrats as the characters in his story. After finishing it, Ranaivo the Bolt immediately began asking me where I went to school. When I told him I attended the University of Chicago, he leaned back and began to recite the names of each of the five Great Lakes. An itinerant trader, Ranaivo, I discovered, carried a paperback pocket atlas of the world with him wherever he went, and seemed to have memorized at least half its contents.

For all that, the story's form is very Malagasy. Take the final episode, the odd little coda in which a letter arrives from French Guyana. Stories of extraordinary deaths, in particular, almost always took the form I described at the end of chapter 7: they tended to end with a final episode that served to provide visible proof that something extraordinary had, indeed, happened. A skeptic hears the story about the two lovers who have become trees and refuses to believe it; he puts an ax to the tree and sees blood springs from the bark. A man dies and reveals to his children he has fled the tomb and become a *Vazimba*; later, they open the tomb and see that the body, indeed, has disappeared. In each case, what would otherwise be mere words are proven by incontrovertible visual evidence. The reason such episodes are crucial is that, as I have said, these stories themselves are all about proof; they are ways of establishing authority through knowledge. The skeptical reader identifies with

the skeptic in the story, and then is chastened and surprised. The arrival of the letter in Ranaivo account serves exactly the same function—he actually saw this with his own eyes, it gives him, retroactively, the authority to speak.[16] In this way it functions in much the same way as the evocation of names and dates itself. It is a strange sort of way of claiming authority, because rather than making himself the embodiment of a unified community, Ranaivo was ultimately claiming the authority to speak for a twisted and divided one; to remind its denizens just what kind of community it was. Hence his tendency to slip into phrases like "in this town in which you live," even when he was speaking to me, a foreigner who did not live there.

Now, in many places in the world, a direct assault on a man's honor can be seen as completely justifying murder. It is important to remember that Imerina is not one of them. As I have said, the logic of the feud—which ultimately rests on a sense that male reputations need to be guaranteed by violence—was explicitly rejected in Imerina. Why, then is the narrator so obviously sympathetic to the murderer? Because he clearly is. In fact, by making him the silent and long-suffering victim of Ralaitsivery's abuse, he is deploying the same narrative techniques Miadana used when she talked about Norbert: posing the silent, long-suffering victim and the thoughtless aggressor so carried off by his angry passions that he loses any sense of shame. But in this case, it is far more extreme; Norbert at least could claim to be the victim of an historical injustice; here it was as if Norbert had been the rich *andriana*, and Miadana the slave.

In the end, Ranaivo's attitude (Miadana's as well, when she first told me the story) was not that different than what most readers' is likely to be: murder is obviously wrong, but in this case, the victim was at least equally to blame.

The real theme of the story of course, is envy, the archetypical Malagasy vice. Here too is a reversal. Normally, when one speaks of envy, the implicit model is witchcraft; often, when speaking of such things in the abstract, the assumption is that an envious witch would typically strike out at some man or woman who had—by endless fortitude and effort—managed to scramble up above the common lot. But in this story, we are presented with the envy of a man who feels he really ought to be a hierarchical superior, against someone who has managed to scramble up. The figure of Ralaitsivery, then, brings together the two most common moral evils: he is both envious witch and arrogant oppressor. In this light, the backdrop of foreign *fahaizana,* the names and dates

and figures—which is always, ultimately, the idiom of coercive authority—represents the chimerical promise that common subjugation could really have make equals of former masters and former slaves. It wasn't really true. Ultimately, the story becomes one of the definitive checks of efforts of black people to raise themselves up too far; it is about the impermeability of social class.

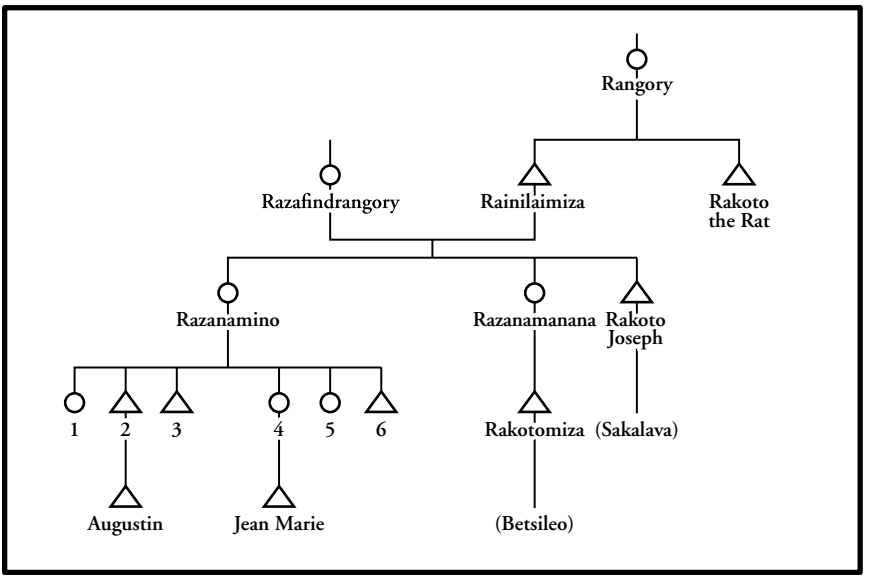
Much of the imagery of the story subtly reinforces the association with witchcraft. The most dramatic detail is the *fanoto*—the long, stave-like pestles used for beating rice, as murder weapon. Almost any Malagasy listener would have been aware that this was also the way people were killed when found guilty by the *tangena*. Once it was clear they were not able to vomit up the three pieces of chicken skin, and thus, that they were guilty of witchcraft, executioners immediately beat them to death with rice pestles. It is quite possible that this really was the method used to kill Ralaitsivery—in which case, it would be a very pointed irony considering the fact that Ralaitsivery himself had been responsible for reviving the *tangena* ordeal, ostensibly, to cleanse Betafo of witches. One way or the other, it allowed Ranaivo to indulge in much horrific detail, which drove home just how wicked was the whole affair, and also, provided the background for the narrator's insistence that Ralaitsivery could not be properly buried as a result—just like a witch found guilty by the *tangena* would not be allowed to enter their ancestral tomb.[17]

Ranaivo the Bolt had his own interest in this story—this will become clear as we proceed.

The Descendants of Rangory: Success and Dissipation

Rakoto the Rat himself had no descendants (unless, as some speculated, there are some in South America). His older brother, Rainilaimiza, had quite a number:

1. Razafindramiza Myriame (b. 1920)
2. Rakotozafy Albert (b. 1922)
3. Ranaivo Ravelona (b. 1929)
4. Razanamanana (b. 1936)
5. Razafindraketaka Celestine (b. 1938)
6. Rafararano Jean-Baptiste (b. 1942)



8.1. Descendants of Rangory

Almost everyone in this lineage grew up in the same house, in Andrianony: the one Rainilaimiza built when he moved there from Avarakady. It is still there, notable as one of the few with a roof of corrugated tin instead of thatch. After he died, his two daughters occupied it jointly, apparently with enough land to support a modest family. His only son (Rakoto Joseph) followed in his uncles' footsteps, worked very hard at school, and eventually, in the '30s, was posted as a minor functionary in the Sakalava country on the west coast. He married a Sakalava woman, and never returned.[18] His nephew Rakotomiza followed almost exactly the same path in the '50s, eventually marrying a woman from Betsileo. No one in Betafo today knows anything about their present descendants. It was Razanamino's children—almost all by different fathers—who remained in her father's house.

For all their bloody history, the family has always had remarkably good relations with Betafo's *andriana*, and with the ones from Avarakady in particular. Actually, by 1935 or '40 Avarakady too was reduced to a single household, its head, the father of the current Ranaivo the Bolt. It was just around that time that Razanamino's eldest daughter Myriame[19] and Ranaivo the Bolt's elder brother fell in love, married, and ended up moving off together to

the capital.[20] This, of course, does a lot to explain Ranaivo's sympathies with their family, and his distress over the ongoing divisions within Betafo. Even more surprisingly, though, was Myriame's brother Albert. Albert ended up marrying two different *andriana* women in succession: the second, from the same wealthy *tampon-tanana* family as Ralaitsivery himself.

By 1990, the only one of the siblings still alive was Ranaivo Ravelona, a good-natured old man of very modest means, who lived with one half-crazy son and two tiny, orphaned granddaughters in the upstairs apartment of the old house. Downstairs lived his nephew Jean Marie. Just to the north was a handsome new house built by Albert's son Augustin, whose father's marriage to a wealthy *andriana* has left him in control of a quite respectable inheritance. Augustin was universally considered one of the leading men of Betafo; he had served two terms as *President Fokontany* from a very early age, and his house had become the main social center of Andrianony. Almost every night there were men and women gathered there, chatting, playing cards or dominoes. Prominent among them was Ranaivo the Bolt's nephew, Rakotonaivo—at that time, with his wife Perline, the real full-time occupant of the great house that remained in Avarakady. The two men were good friends—they often collaborated in business, since both spent some time away from home marketing iron goods, and one often saw them in the late afternoon, riding the same bicycle, or trying to, up the muddy roads that led from Arivonimamo back to Betafo.

Rakoto the Rat's mild-mannered dedication to learning as a mode of social advancement thus became a model for his family. Actually, they did remarkably well for themselves, establishing a permanent alliance with a long-standing *andriana* family, many passing to the same sort of government service jobs that became the refuge of the nobility. But it's one thing to raise oneself up. To pass that status on to one's children is quite another. Marriage between *andriana* and their former slaves was, technically, forbidden. When it did occur, one had to either leave town or live in the constant awareness that one's neighbors saw one as a fitting object of ancestral vengeance. Marriage outside the system meant being lost to one's ancestral lands entirely.

The Descendants of Rainitaba

I now turn from some of the more successful *mainty* families to one of the least.

Rainitaba appears to have lived his life in Antandrok'omby, but his family was not among the "good and faithful servants" rewarded with tracts of land. Still, everyone in Betafo had heard Rainitaba's name. Because after he died, Rainitaba abandoned his tomb and transformed into a snake. He had "become an animal," some said, or "turned into a *Vazimba*"—some would repeat the story with amusement, others with a trace of scandal, but everyone knew it—despite the fact that, as most were quick to add, his actual descendants had mostly abandoned Betafo long ago.

Madame Mariel first told me the story. (Mariel seemed to have a penchant for stories involving snakelike monsters.) She first outlined it at a party in the middle of a wedding in Belanitra; I didn't catch the whole thing at the time, later, I asked when visiting in her house in Soanirano, which is the very most northern quarter of Arivonimamo:

> Mariel: That's what I was telling you once, David: this fellow Rainitaba was buried, but later when they opened the tomb and looked inside, only the cloth was still there. The body had disappeared.
> David: So is that what makes him a *Vazimba*?
> Mariel: Yes—and he like came in a dream to his child, saying "I've become a *Vazimba* to the east of the village." Rather close to where the Beasts of Andrianony are still. And at the time, you couldn't take babies down there to the washing-place because they'd die. Later on though he left, and headed west—he followed the river to the west of the village of Betafo . . . They say the spot by the spring became dirty, so he abandoned it and moved out there.
> David: And Rainitaba's descendants, are there any still around?
> Mariel: There are a few down here in Soanirano, but they're really just his sons by marriage [*vinantolahiny*]. The ones that used to live in Betafo, they're all dead.

Just as everyone knew the outlines of the story, so too could most of them point out the course of Rainitaba's meanderings since death. From the tomb, he descended to the waters around the spring to the east of the village—the same secluded spot, full of quiet pools, where Miadana was once scolded for washing off her pots. Later, he followed the river to the north of Betafo downstream until he reached to the ruins of Antandrok'omby. Near it is a small reedy pool, where he was supposed to have resided. After that, most added, he abandoned that pool too, but no one is quite sure where he went. Certainly, he is not in Betafo any more.

Now, there is every reason to believe that a man named Rainitaba did indeed live in Antandrok'omby in the 1870s or '80s.[21] His daughter, Rabakomanga, was still living there with three sons of her own when she died

(probably at the age of forty-five or fifty) in 1912. She was apparently the one who had the dream.

It was only after I had been working in Betafo for some time that I discovered that there were still several descendants of Rainitaba who did still live in Betafo, off and on. The most frequent was Razanamavo, an old, poor woman who spent most of her time doing odd jobs for her slightly better-off neighbors in the *mainty* quarter of Betafo, or seeking work in town. Even the house she stayed in wasn't really hers—it was an out-building of Armand's, little more than a shed, really, which Armand would let her use. Most people in Betafo seemed unaware of her ancestry, some, of her very existence.

I first met her in Armand's apartment in Arivonimamo, which was a single long room set on a courtyard which opened on the street. The apartment had two beds, wall hangings, and, just outside the door, a little bamboo fence with a charcoal brazier, where Nety or other family members would cook. It was sort of a collective apartment; most everyone in Armand's family used it at one time or another, and people from Betafo would often drop by if they happened to be in town. When I chanced by while Razanamavo was visiting, Nety seized the opportunity to see if we could get her to tell us something about her ancestor.

Actually, Nety had previously wondered whether Razanamavo would be willing to talk to me at all: "she might consider it embarrassing, having an ancestor who was a *Vazimba*." But at first she seemed quite happy to. Rainitaba, she said, was originally a nobleman from Betsileo. "Back then, you know, people would be bought and sold," she said. "And that was the origin of Rainitaba. He was a lost person." He had been captured and sold into slavery in Betafo. The fact that people referred to him as a *Vazimba* did not bother her. What bothered her, she told Nety, was that people said he had turned into an animal. "Rainitaba is not an animal," she insisted, "but a *Vazimba*—a person, a person like a *Kalanoro*.[22] Haven't you ever dreamed of him?" Nety said no. Well, many have, said Razanamavo. He used to appear to her grandmother and her father regularly. He had appeared to her, too, before the birth of her first child.[23]

Razanamavo had an oddly distant manner of speaking, somehow absent; she crouched wrapped in a yellow cloth staring off into the courtyard as she talked, as if looking at something far away, or maybe nothing, and never once gazed at the other people in the room. No doubt she was exhausted from an afternoon at work; but still, her manner seemed to complement the content of

her discourse, which was much more evocative and dreamy than the usual, matter-of-fact style of historical narration. After telling her story, and answering a few of Nety's questions about her relatives, she seemed to fade away, staring off as if so lost in thought that she didn't even notice we were talking to her, until after a little while, we gave up and started talking about something else.

> Razanamavo: He, you know—our grandmother said that when he was about to die, he said: "I am about to die now, so take me to the north of the village, to the dam. And as for me," he said, "don't bury me in a tomb but just release me in the current of the river. And get a *lamba arin-drano*,"[24] he said, "like you would for burying a son-in-law."
>
> And they said: "Maybe we won't put you in the river, because we'd be embarrassed."
>
> "No, don't be embarrassed," he said, "because you'll receive a great blessing if you do it that way."
>
> But they didn't do it. They just buried him normally and left him there.
>
> Someone: This was Rainitaba?
>
> Razanamavo: A little hole like that they buried him in—there was no tomb, no entry to the west. Later they got ready to do a *famadihana* [to move him into a proper tomb], and looked for the cloth, and they set the cloth around him nicely.
>
> 'If you do this thing, then a great blessing will come to you." Then the water flooded . . . he was dead. "I don't like *lambamena*," he said, "but *lamba arin-drano,* and . . ." those were to be the mourning clothes. "So your children will never become poor, nor the generations of your descendants to come . . ." This is something they all dreamed, all of them absolutely. But we didn't get the blessing because we didn't do it. They put him in the center of the top shelf to the north of the tomb, and he still hasn't been moved to this day.
>
> Once, there were a good number of descendants, but there are few left any more.

She too told how he had moved from the pool to the east of the village to the one near Antandrokomby. She wasn't sure where he had gone after that, but she suspected he had finally returned to his original home in Betsileo.

The 'little hole" she refers to was a temporary grave. When he died, it seems, his daughter simply buried him: this was often done by slaves, until such time as a group of them could pool enough money to create a proper tomb. The opportunity only arose around 1910, when several *mainty* families got together to build a collective tomb on a hill overlooking Betafo to the northeast. Rabakomanga contributed some money to the effort, and when the tomb was done had her father's body wrapped properly in cloth, then transferred to one of its most prominent shelves. It was after this, the first time they returned to perform a *famadihana*, that they discovered it was gone.

At that time, Rabakomanga was by no means penniless; she and her sons had received a small amount of a land from her former owners, and passed it to her sons.[25] Her sons apparently were not able to hold on to much of it. Most of it was sold or mortgaged off. Those who remember her sons, Ingahivelona and Rakotonanahary, remember them as landless laborers, and desperately poor. In fact, the history of Rainitaba's family was always represented as one of loss, poverty, and dispersal. They never received the blessing that they were offered. They scattered; now they're gone. In fact, it is one of the ironies of their history that it took me a long time to realize that the lineage had been really quite prolific: most of Rainitaba's grandchildren had numerous sons and daughters. Some died in infancy; others were fostered by relatives in other places. Almost all of them would leave before they were thirty, there being no property to speak of or reason for them to stay. When once or twice I tried to make lists of their names, I found it was impossible; people would just shrug and said something to the effect of "Oh, there were lots of them. Who remembers? None of them live around here any more."[26]

The Nature of *Vazimba*

Unrealized promises, currents, dispersal, disappearance . . . the traditions surrounding Rainitaba seem to echo the sense of loss and displacement inherent to the experience of slavery, and to make it a figure for the lineage's own eventual dispersal, its withering away as a presence in Betafo. In fact, it is a very complicated story which draws together a series of very old ideas and images—some Merina, some Betsileo—into a narrative so powerful that it has gone from an obscure piece of family history to an essential part of the historical consciousness of the community, a story everyone could repeat.

Part of how it could do this was by seizing on the richness of the term *Vazimba*, a term which has cropped up periodically over the course of the book, used to refer to ancient aborigines, lost ancestors, or dangerous spirits of the water. It is not easy to summarize the meaning of the term—in fact, depending on the context, it can be any or all of these.

The "*Vazimba* problem" has also become the subject of a very long and confusing intellectual history, most of which seems to me a total waste of time. It all begins from the assumption, on the part of early missionaries, that the stories they heard about *Vazimba* spirits must reflect the memory of an ancient "aboriginal race" that had occupied the highlands of Madagascar before

its present-day inhabitants. The logic seems to have been this: since the people of Imerina tended to have straight hair and more Asian-looking features than most other Malagasy, they had to be the descendants of recent immigrants from the Malay archipelago. The *Vazimba*, then, would have to be the people already living in the highlands when they arrived: backwards, dark-skinned savages, originally from East Africa.

Little if any evidence was ever produced to back up any of this, and there would be little reason to go into it, were it not for the fact that this is the picture of Malagasy history still being taught in Malagasy schools. Occasionally, I would find people who would, when I asked about *Vazimba*, reply with something to the effect of "Well, you have to understand that the *Vazimba* were really an entirely separate race" (always using the French word, *race*); and then go on to cite things they had read in books or heard professors discussing on the radio. Even Armand did this the first time I asked him about *Vazimba*, but it was a one-time thing, a kind of bow to scholarly authority which seemed to have nothing to do with anything he subsequently had to say. For the most part, popular conceptions seem to have changed little from the ones Gerald Berg (1977:7–12) documents for the early nineteenth century—the stories that missionaries first seized on and misinterpreted.

Let me summarize these:

First and foremost, *Vazimba* were ancestors whose bodies had been lost. If a man or woman drowned or died in a far-off country and their body was not recovered, they were often said to have "become a *Vazimba*." This could be a simple figure of speech; one did not necessarily mean anything more than that the person would never become a proper ancestor, never be wrapped and placed inside the tomb. But more often, the term *Vazimba* was applied to the ghosts of such unfortunate people, dangerous spirits, angry because they were cut off from proper relations with their descendants.

For all they lacked bodies, *Vazimba* were always identified with a specific place. Most often, their ghosts inhabited marshy places far from human habitation: little springs or pools between the rice fields; grottoes often marked by the presence of red fish or red crabs; knots of bamboo, reeds and rushes; sometimes, in certain kinds of tree. One might occasionally encounter a *Vazimba* by a rock or spring on an isolated hillside or even amidst the crags of a mountain, but it was unusual to find them far away from water.

There were all sorts of speculations about the origins of *Vazimba*.[27] Many would not even speculate. The important thing about *Vazimba*, said Germain—

Armand's brother—is that you don't know what they are or where they come from. They are by definition mysterious, invisible, a kind of unknown power:

> Germain: *Vazimba* are a kind of thing that isn't seen. They don't show their bodies like, say, people do, or the divine spirits who possess mediums and cure people. If you carry pork to a place where one is, then that night, as soon as you kill the light you look and there's this hand moving towards you. As soon as you light the candle again, it's gone. Or, say you're washing your face in you don't know what it is . . . and likely as not your face will swell up hugely like this, and it absolutely won't go away until you burn incense over it. You take it to someone to give it *hasina,* and then you're cured. But that's all you know: you have absolutely no idea what was in the water.

As this quotation makes clear, normally, when people thought about *Vazimba*, it was as a matter of immediate practical concern. One discovered that a place was haunted by *Vazimba* because someone had taken ill. A child playing in the fields drank some water from a reedy pool, or took fishes that they shouldn't have, or they had been tending pigs or taking some other polluting substance to the place where a *Vazimba* was. The child would fall into a fever, or parts of their body would swell up; usually, they would be tormented by dreams or apparitions. *Vazimba* were normally invisible; when they did appear, it was almost always in the nightmare visions of a child. The ritual for expelling them was similar to rituals for expelling hostile ghosts: the curer would burn things, there would be incense and smoke. But one would usually also *manasina* the place, leaving almost exactly the same sort of offerings one would give to ancestors at *famadhina*: rum or honey, candies, ginger, suet, bananas, bread. If nothing else, these rituals would "clean" the place of the pollution that had offended the creature and made it "fierce," to soothe it, placate it, and at the same time, ensure it remained confined there. The basic underlying logic was not all that different from that of *famadihana*.

I knew at least seven different places in the eastern *fokontany* of Betafo where there were rumored to be *Vazimba*; I wouldn't be surprised if there were more. Often it's not entirely clear, because people differ on whether there is still a *Vazimba* in a given spot, or if there is, whether it is still *masiaka,* "fierce," still a force to be reckoned with.

For present purposes, what is really important is the longstanding relationship between *Vazimba* and slaves. Many of the captives brought to Imerina quickly developed ritual ties with local *Vazimba*. There was felt to be some sort of affinity. Madam Mariel's story about how Betafo's former slaves

intermarried with the *Vazimba* they found living there is only one rather unusual modern expression of this connection.[28]

Slaves felt an affinity with *Vazimba* because *Vazimba* were figures of loss and dispersal. The one common feature in all stories about *Vazimba* is that they involve people being uprooted, cast out of their proper place. *Vazimba* are people who have been driven from their homes, ancestors whose descendants have dispersed and forgotten them, who have themselves left their solid tombs to enter confused, watery places. Like slaves, then, their defining feature is that they are lost; they embody the complete negation of those ties of descent that bind the living to ancestors buried in ancestral soil.[29] If slaves were people wrenched from their ancestors, *Vazimba* were ancestors lost to their descendants. It is not difficult, then, to understand why slaves might have seized on these images as a way of capturing their own experience—and ultimately, translating it into a source of power.

A story from the *Tantara ny Andriana* (Callet 1908: 240–243; Dahle and Sims 1984:197), about a *Vazimba* named Ranoro and a Betsileo woman possessed by her, illustrates how this had already begun to happen in the nineteenth century. It is worth reproducing, as it makes it much easier to understand the relation of *Vazimba* and slaves in Betafo today.

Even now, Ranoro is probably the most famous *Vazimba* in Madagascar.[30] According to the story, Andriambodilova, the Antehiroka's Great Ancestor, was strolling by the banks of the river Mamba one day when he chanced on Ranoro, a beautiful water nymph (*zazavavindrano*), sunning herself on a rock. He proposed marriage. She was not necessarily averse. But she warned him that marriage with supernatural beings is difficult; there are always *fady*. If he wished to marry her, he would have to agree, among other things, never to use salt or even to say the word.

Some versions give no explanation for this (rather extreme) restriction; others explain Ranoro's father was named "Lord Salt." If she left the waters to marry a mortal man, she would never again be able to see her father. Therefore, she made her new husband agree never to say anything that would remind her of him, because of the pain his memory would evoke. He agreed, and the two married and had children. But after many years, when the two were in the middle of a domestic argument, he spat it out in anger, calling her "daughter of salt." She no sooner heard the word than turned her back and on him and walked to the banks of the river, dived in, and was never seen again. The place where she disappeared, a rocky grotto by the river, had been a place

of worship ever since, and her present-day descendants continue to maintain a *fady* on putting salt on their food—in fact, many versions add that any salt that comes near the grotto instantly dissolves away.

This is a very famous story. One reason it is so well documented, no doubt, is that Ranoro's sanctuary is practically inside the suburbs of the capital. In Arivonimamo, the Antehiroka were famous mainly for having the most difficult *fady* anyone had ever heard of (it's hard to stay away from garlic, they aren't even allowed to use salt!) Clearly, the salt itself is important. In fact I suspect the whole story is a kind of play on a Malagasy proverb: *sira latsaka an-drano, tsy himpody intsony,* "like salt fallen into the water, it will never again return to its previous form." As with Rainitaba, a broken trust leads to a very literal dissolution: what was once a single object breaks into an infinity of tiny things which flow away in all directions.

Already in the nineteenth century, Ranoro's sanctuary, like her husband's tomb, had become places where people came from far and wide to make vows, and ask for favors; Ranoro is still famous for helping infertile women to conceive.[31] But in the nineteenth century, these were places that slaves were not allowed to enter; their presence was considered to be polluting, in much the same way as pork. This makes it all the more surprising that the most famous disciple of Ranoro of that century was, in fact, a slave—a woman originally from the Betsileo country in the southern highlands of Madagascar. During the reign of Ranavalona I, this woman (always herself referred to as Ranoro) began to periodically fall into trance and be possessed (*tsindriana*) by the *Vazimba*'s spirit. Her fame began to spread after she cured a woman who had been struck blind after sullying Ranoro's grotto; soon, even free people were beginning to frequent her seeking advice and cures. According to the story preserved in Callet, the news eventually reached the queen, who ordered the woman put to the poison ordeal. When she survived, Ranavalona recognized her claims to be legitimate by granting her an official guard of thirty Merina soldiers.

The mortal Ranoro appears to have become a figure of some fame and influence—although she remained a slave. She is said to have slept on an elevated bed suspended from the rafters; when possessed, she would walk across the room on a tightrope and perform other remarkable feats. For her last miracle, she went to Ranoro's grotto and dived into the water; it was only three days later, we are told, that she emerged. When she did, she told her followers that she'd been living with *Vazimba* in the bottom of the cave. They fed on

raw fish and crabs. They tried to make her join them in their meals, but the food repelled her, and having refused them, she was returned to the surface. The spirits had rejected her. Claiming her contact had thus been broken, Ranoro left her home; and went back to find her father, who she believed was still alive somewhere in Betsileo.

In her case at least—and hers was very unusual—it was possible to use access to *Vazimba* not simply as a way to embody and conceive the severing of bonds of descent, but as a way of restoring them.

Snakes

Nowadays, *olona mainty* in Imerina almost always claim to be Betsileo. Most, in fact, claim to be descendants of the famous Betsileo king Andriamanalina. I must have met thirty different people who claimed to be his descendants. It is not hard to see why this identity would seem both appealing and plausible.

"Betsileo" is the name given the people who occupy the south part of the vast plateau that forms the center of Madagascar. They live directly to the south of Imerina. In the eighteenth century, their country contained a number of independent kingdoms; in the beginning of the ninteenth century, it was conquered by the Merina king Andrianampoinimerina. From the point of view of present-day Merina, the Betsileo are a bit of an anomaly. On the one hand, they are considered "black" people, like the people of the coasts, and most Betsileo could be said to be rather more African in appearance than most Merina. However, they are seen as obviously different from coastal peoples. In fact, in most ways, Betsileo are almost indistinguishable from Merina. Their way of speaking is similar, so are their houses, clothes, and ritual practices. If any differences are widely remarked upon, it is that Betsileo tend to be more easygoing, and are much more sophisticated farmers: their skill at irrigation and terracing, for example, is famous throughout Madagascar.

In the twentieth century, though, Betsileo also became famous for labor migration. By the '60s, after agricultural reforms had intensified the demand for labor, each March and April would see tens of thousands of Betsileo women moving from village to village across Imerina, following the replanting, each January tens of thousands of men would come for the harvest. Some married local people and stayed on. Several villages around Arivonimamo were almost half Betsileo. It is easy to see how *mainty* laborers already living in Imerina would identify with such people and, also, wish to blur any distinction between

them, especially since white Merina tended to think of Bestileo as affable, industrious people they had no compunctions about marrying.

To understand the story of Rainitaba, though, one has to understand that most Merina believe that Betsileo, when they die, have a habit of transforming themselves into a species of water-snake called *fanany.*[32] *Fanany* rarely venture on to dry land, but when they do are easily identifiable by their striking coloration, orange, white, and black, which is said to resemble that of a *lamba arin-drano.* Should a *fanany* happen to appear near a Betsileo home, the family would immediately carry it inside and try to find out who it was, listing off the names of everyone who had recently died until it nods its head at one of them. After that, they feed it rice with milk and honey, sometimes play music or otherwise celebrate its presence, but afterward, the head of the family makes a speech, thanking it for coming, but asking it to leave now "because" (as Nety put it) "you're frightening the children."

Not only that: most people have also heard stories about penniless old Betsileo laborers who died and were buried in graves next to the fields, then later disappeared. Ramena told of an old cattleherd whose dying wish was that he not be wrapped in *lambamena,* or bound, but simply buried in a giant basket; later they found the basket open and the body gone. Another man told of a harvester buried in the ground above a rice field, who emerged as a *fanany* to be fed by his former employers; later he came to them in a dream to say he had returned to his ancestral lands.

Such stories already overlap with ideas about lost travelers who die away from home and become *Vazimba*. But in this case, transformation contains the possibility of resolution; a number of people told me that Betsileo who happen to die and are buried far from home will almost always turn into serpents and go home.

The story of Rainitaba, then, fuses elements taken from *Vazimba* stories with those about *fanany.* His descendants say he was a Betsileo noble who had been kidnapped and taken to Imerina. When he died, he refused to be tied down and contained like a Merina ancestor; instead, he wanted his children to release him in the currents of the river, wrapped in a Betsileo cloth that was colored like the coat of a *fanany.* When they couldn't bring themselves to so completely offend the sensibilities of their Merina neighbors, he made the transformation on his own but, as a result, they lost the blessing he would otherwise have given them. His subsequent history had him following the course of the waters downstream, but also in a sense, moving backward in

time: from Betafo to his old settlement of Antandrok'omby, and finally, back to Betsileo once again. But as with Ranoro (who was also sometimes said to have moved steadily downstream, ever farther from her former home), returning home meant orphaning one's own descendants.

It's only now that his descendants have almost entirely dispersed that people say he's abandoned Imerina entirely. For decades, he lingered in the waters around Betafo, visiting his grandchildren in their dreams, suspended halfway in a movement of escape he could not yet bear to bring to its conclusion.

One reason the story seemed to strike such a chord with people was that it encapsulates something fundamental about the experience of slaves and their descendants. Perhaps one can even say, the experience of slavery itself: at least, in so far as one accepts the common argument that slavery as an institution is founded on the destruction of social worlds. According to this argument, slaves are by definition human beings that have been wrenched from the society which formed them, the web of social ties which has made them what they are, and left kinless and alien, living a sort of social death (Meillassoux 1991; Patterson 1982; etc.).

By this logic, it is the moment described by Raombana, the moment when children are torn from their mother's arms and families broken apart, which makes a slave a slave.

It is difficult to assess the full implications of such a moment for the historical consciousness of those who passed through it. Rarely do large numbers of people go through a rupture so utter and extreme. It brings to mind Elaine Scarry's (1985) observation that physical pain empties worlds of their meaning. In normal life, one is invested in a thousand ways in one's surroundings, in people, places, projects, things one cares about, so that one's sense of self expands outward to imbue and become entangled with a much larger social world. One effect of extreme physical pain, she says, is to empty these investments of all meaning; one's sense of self collapses into the narrow confines of the hurting body. For that moment nothing and no one else is real. The scene described by Raombana in a way reverses this: the victims are, for the most part, physically unscathed, but as they are lead off from burning villages, most of the men they have ever known lying dead in bloody pools, women and children dragged from each others' arms; in a matter of hours, the entire universe of social relations in which they have come into being was utterly annihilated. The result, as Raombana's friend observed, was a trauma so intense that no mere physical pain could possibly surpass it.

All this does not mean that memories of such a moment are likely to become a part of historical consciousness—in fact they are just the sort of thing one would normally suspect survivors would prefer not to talk about. Certainly the memory of them is not preserved in oral histories of the present day. But if for slaves and their descendants, that one moment, when worlds dissolved away, seems to have reverberated endlessly, it is because such experiences did not stop. Dispersal, families drifting apart, people uprooted from their memories; for most, it was repeated with every generation.

It also happened within a cultural milieu which placed an unusual emphasis on the politics of memory—particularly, memories of parents and ancestral homes. Ritual action was especially concerned with the manipulation and transformation of such memories—particularly in women. In marriage negotiations, for instance, the suitor's family offered a series of cash payments which compensated either for the nurturance and care the girl's mother had provided her—such as the *valim-babena,* the "answer for having carried an infant on one's back"—or services the daughter herself would no longer be able to provide—the *akana kitay,* "gathering firewood," or *alana volo fotsy,* "pulling out white hairs." In the latter case especially, an image so intimate, of a daughter poring over her mother's head, searching for white hairs to pluck out, evokes a whole world of domestic sentiments—protective affection, the fear of aging and resultant loss, the pain of ruptured domesticity when the woman moves away—the money, officially meant to "ask for the parent's blessing," can equally be seen, I think, as recognition of that pain.[33]

For women who had been carried into slavery, evocation of such memories could only serve as a reminder of acts of irreparable violence, of the fact that the entire world of those memories that had been brutally destroyed. It is hardly surprising that the Betsileo woman should have felt such an affinity with the figure of Ranoro. Ranoro was a woman who could not bear to hear her father's name because it evoked such painful memories. It was a story about salt dropped in water, things that could never be brought back together or attain their previous form. In this one case, of course, the story may have taken on a different level of poignancy because the woman possessed by Ranoro believed her father was still alive—at least, in the end she managed to win her freedom so as to try to find him. Though from this distant vantage, it is hard to avoid wondering whether the dream of finding her father was really just as much a phantasm, a projection of her imagination, as Ranoro herself had been.[34]

The *andriana*, I have argued, suffered from a surfeit of memory. History

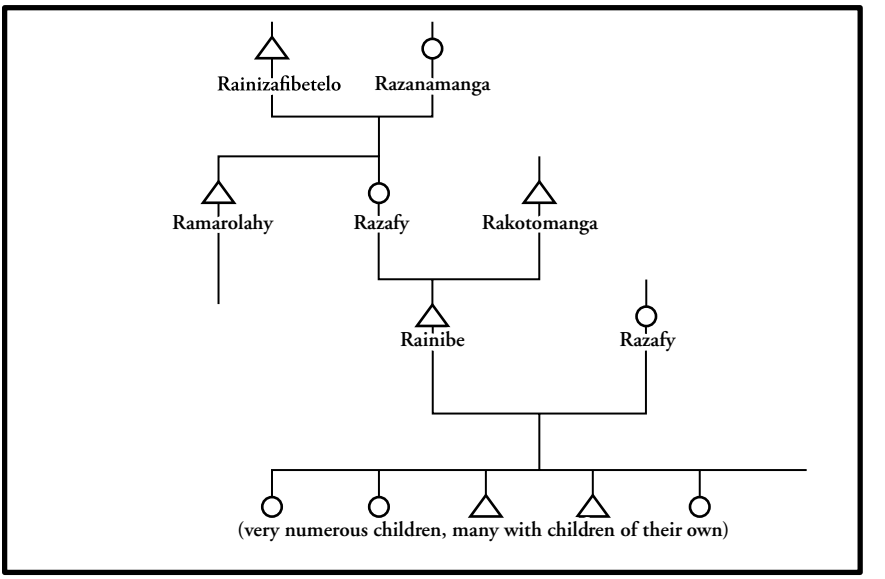
was fixed to the soil so densely that it became almost impossible to live on it. Slaves had had to struggle for every bit of memory they could fix. For them it was not the imposition of memory, cohesion, of constraints that held people down to a central place that is felt as a form of violence, but the very lack of it. But this rootlessness could, sometimes, open opportunities. *Vazimba* were not always only figures of dispersal. They also held out the promise of a kind of power—if one rather dangerous and unpredictable. Here too the story of Ranoro provides a precedent for what is still happening today: slaves, or their descendants, continue to convert images of their own sense of loss into points of access to another world, through which they can find the means to reconstruct a place for themselves, to bring things together rather than let them drift apart.

The Descendants of Razanamanga

Were it not for Rainibe and his *Vazimba*, the story of this lineage might well look much like Rainitaba's. But in fact, it now represents the second largest family in Betafo—Rainibe's own, located since 1973 at the end of a narrow valley of rice fields that stretches to the east of Betafo, in a hamlet called Anjakalambo that he founded himself.

I originally met Rainibe on the invitation of his wife Razafy, a woman of at least fifty who would walk down the bad road that lead to Arivonimamo two or three mornings a week, with a huge metal canister of fresh milk balanced on her head. She had several well-off families in Arivonimamo who paid her to supply them. When she didn't go, she would usually send one of her daughters or granddaughters, depending on who happened to be around. It was a numerous family.

When I first met her in Arivonimamo, I had been coming to Betafo for a while; she knew all about my interest in history and enthusiastically invited me to come visit her family in Anjakalambo. During my first visit Miadana and Claude volunteered to accompany me, in part from curiosity, in part, I think, because they were a little suspicious of Rainibe. Not that I could perceive anything worrisome about my reception. Rainibe was a relaxed, avuncular sort of fellow with a deep voice and robust gestures; as such he made the perfect foil to his wife, whose manner, despite her age, was almost girlish—her every contribution to the conversation, no matter how innocuous, always sounded as if she thought there was slightly impertinent about it. Rainibe and



8.2. Rainibe

Razafy seemed one of the most genuinely happy couples I had seen in Madagascar; not only happy, but demonstrably so, surrounded as they were by veritable legions of descendants, in a house where one could hardly find a place to sit without a child walking or crawling up to you.

Rainibe began by telling me about his family, which, he explained, went back to his grandmother Razanamanga.

> Rainibe: The way Grandma told the story, she was Betsileo. She was Betsileo, but when she came here, the first place she settled was on the village on top of Mount Ambohitrambo . . .
> Miadana: What was her name?
> Rainibe: Razanamanga. Razanamanga, and her husband was Rainizafibetelo.
>
> So at first she lived there, and then she asked permission to move to Betafo. Then she lived down there [on *tampon-tanana*]—this was before it was abandoned—with those Andrianamboninolona.
> Razafy: Because back then . . . the people here used to be what they call "servants" [*mpanompo*].
> Rainibe: Then later still, there was an end to the days of . . . of working for the Andrianamboninolona, so she moved to Avarakady. Such were our origins in former times—because I was already more or less grown up by then; by the time the poll tax was set at five *sikajy* and four, I was more or less a grown-up and my grandmother told me the story of her origins.

Claude: So—what's this five *sikajy* and four, then?
Rainibe: [Laughs] Four *ariary*, plus five *sikajy*
Razafy: Because you know that's what money was like back then.
Rainibe: And that's where it was set when I started to pay the poll tax. And it got to be more after that; it kept going up and up and up from there. And back then, when you people were in power [this was to me]—I was just talking about this the other day and I was saying: "So tell me, tell me, my good man," I said—as there were three other people I was talking to—"which do you prefer, the old days or now?" Because "as for me," I said, "I dream about the old days because back then, there was lots of money."

Nostalgia for the colonial era was a theme that ran through much of Rainibe's conversation.[35] It was not one I heard much of from anyone else; though at least among many of the *mainty*, there was a vague feeling that the French had always been sympathetic to their cause. On two separate occasions, for instance, Rainibe remarked on how the French medics who came to inoculate Betafo's children would always make a point of praising the black babies as stronger and hardier than the white ones. But there was also an element of particular family history. The story came out when I asked him about causes of the fire of 1929, which Rainibe remembered much differently than anybody else:

Rainibe: Now that, that was an act of spite. Someone burned down the town out of spite. The fire started here to the west of town. And it was all because our grandfather had been exempted from the poll tax because he had so many children. People said "those Rainizafibetelos don't have to pay any more," and that was the real reason for it . . .

One day he went to Arivonimamo, since he would always come to work there, and went to see the civil administrator—a Frenchman. He came in with all his children all swarming around him. And the Frenchman looked at him like this [a quizzical sidelong glance]. And Dad looked back at him like that too. And: "No, this one doesn't have to pay," said the Frenchman. And inside—because this Frenchman, you know, had lots and lots of children's clothing hanging around inside. The whole house was nothing but clothing—so each of the kids who'd followed him there got some clothes.

Miadana: So you're saying, people made out like he had done something wrong . . .
Rainibe: . . . people made out like he had done something wrong, because he'd been exempted from the tax.
Razafy: Because the Frenchman had realized that . . .
Rainibe:. . . this guy is living the life of a dog here.

Rainizafibetelo and Razanamanga indeed had quite a number of children (Rainibe laughingly suggested twenty-four). Claude's mother remembered Razanamanga from the 1940s as the mother of a flock of adolescent boys and

girls who used to work their fields. Like the descendants of Rainitaba, this was a family with next to no resources, who had to get by almost exclusively from the meager fruits of sharecropping and wage labor, wandering to town or other villages when an opportunity arose, following every possibility. Like them, too, few saw any reason to remain in Betafo by the time they were adults.

By 1959[36] practically all these children had scattered except Rainibe's mother Razafy (b. 1907). She married a local boy named Rakotomanga and bore a number of children, who also scattered, though according to Rainibe, five did have children of their own. All he noted share in his tomb—most in fact were already dead and buried there. As for the children, there were one or two in Arivonimamo, others in Amboanana, Anelobe, or other parts uncertain or unknown. "They all scattered. I alone remain here to watch over the ancestral lands."

It's interesting that Rainibe began the story by talking about his grandmother; even more interesting, that he left his own father out of it completely. When at one point, later on, I did ask him about his father, he made it clear he found the subject distasteful. "Rakotomanga," he said, "never took care of me. Not so much as a pair of shorts would he give me. Despite all that, when he died and the time came for a *famadihana,* there was no end to the children carrying cloth to wrap him with. Asking for his blessing—even though he never loved them."

As his wife explained, Rainibe's parents had never got along. His mother continued to live in Razanamanga's house in Avarakady, his father was usually away, off looking for work, and never lived with them. This is not the only reason Rainibe chose to begin his family history by talking about his grandmother, however—it was also to establish a link to her former home atop Mount Ambohitrambo, though it seems unlikely that Razanamanga did really live on top of a mountain.[37] Perhaps Rainibe is compressing several generations of family history into one. The point of the story is clearly to draw a connection to the mountain itself, and the shrine that is still on top of it.

While there is no settlement atop Ambohitrambo nowadays, there is a very famous shrine, or *doany.* At the top of the mountain is a long, gentle plane of granite; at the highest point an ancient tower rises abruptly, with a twisting stair curling around it, and on its top is a compound containing a very ancient tomb. It is said to contain the body of Lailoza, the cruel prince who had made his subjects build a bridge of silk between two mountains.[38]

Since at least the 1960s, it had become a place of pilgrimage: people would come to make vows; to ask for wealth or children or other favors; or to sacrifice candies, chickens, even cattle if their prayers were answered. Mediums would come to ask the spirit's help in their invisible battle with the witches who have caused their patients to fall ill.

Rainibe's main fame in Betafo, as I noted in the last chapter, was as one of these mediums.[39] Not that he ever admitted this to me. In fact, when I first met his wife and casually remarked I'd heard her husband was a curer, she immediately denied it. But in speaking to me he played much the same game as Ramena: first deny everything, then spend the rest of the conversation doing everything he could to make it clear these denials were untrue. Most of the times I talked to him at home, he would be wearing an old *Malabary* half unbuttoned at the top, with a necklace of brightly colored beads would be clearly visible underneath. No one would wear such a necklace who was not adept at medicine. As I have said, this kind of gesture—an ostentatious display of the fact that there was something hidden—was itself a way of making a claim to undefined, and potentially dangerous, kinds of power.

At any rate, Rainibe was perfectly willing to admit that he knew a great deal about Lailoza and his tomb; even, that some was from personal experience.

> David: So is he the only ancestor buried in that tomb?
> Rainibe: Well, there are . . . I guess you could say that certain people "made mouth" as the saying goes. "If I have lots and lots of children," they'd say, "then the first of my children I will give to you." So the babies are in there, there, there, there . . .
> Razafy: Since he has *hasina,* they vow "when I have my second child I'll give the first to you."
> Rainibe: My own request now, when I said "if I have children . . ."—I didn't say I'd give them my children if I succeeded in begetting any. I just did like normal people do, just vowed a bottle's worth of rum and some candies.

I don't know if even Rainibe really expected me to believe that there were people who made human sacrifices atop this mountain, let alone of their own babies. It doesn't really matter anyway. What's important here is that he claims that his own prolific family—he has had twelve children in all, four of whom were then living in Anjakalambo, many more of whom have children of their own being fostered there by aunts or uncles—came about as the result of a vow to Lailoza. For a long time he and his first wife had no children; it was only when he was in his late thirties, after a visit to the peak of the mountain and the vow of rum and candies, that they managed to conceive. The origin of his

own fertility goes back to his grandmother's former home—a rather striking convergence with Razanamavo's story that Rainitaba (the *Vazimba*) always came to his descendants before they gave birth. In fact, the connection is even stronger because, as everyone other than Rainibe was perfectly willing to point out, Rainibe was not only a medium who regularly communicated with Lailoza, he also used a *Vazimba* spirit to make contact with him.

Actually, Rainibe *was* willing to admit—however coyly—that his family had a long connection with some of Betafo's *Vazimba*. For example, underneath the little concrete dam to the north of Betafo was a pool notorious for housing one.

> Rainibe: As for the dam, now, that's not entirely clear to me, but they say my late grandfather was taken into it. They say he was inside there for a week. For a week he was under water, and crabs were all he had to eat.
> Miadana: And he wasn't harmed in any way?
> Rainibe: No.
> Miadana: And he didn't tell the story afterwards?
> Rainibe: And he didn't tell the story afterwards—so I don't know what it was that took him in there. But he was in there for a week. The rock there has a little opening, and . . . he came there and he said, "It was as if I were being pulled in through the hole." He even slept in there. "Where did Dad go off to?" He was nowhere to be found, because he'd been drawn in and he just stayed in there like that and ate crabs.
> Claude: Raw crabs?
> Rainibe: I don't know if they were raw or cooked. Well . . . I guess there wouldn't have been cooked ones.
> Claude: Because you know, if you eat those, then you become fast friends with them.
> Rainibe: Yes.
> Claude: If you won't eat them, they might even kill you.
> Rainibe: Might even kill you. Yes. And he absolutely did eat with them, he said—the thing . . . the *Vazimba* down there had innumerable children. And the chief one, their father, had a huge beard. He did say that.
> Miadana: But it wasn't like he was really wandering around outside [in a trance] all this time?
> Rainibe: No, it was like he was carried off by something [*nentin-javatra*]. It was like this: say it's afternoon, this afternoon, and here's me, and suddenly, it's as if there's some thing pressing down on me. And then it just carries me off, down the road and into the water—suddenly I just find myself entering the water.

This particular *Vazimba* was well-known in Betafo. A number of people told me they had dreamed of him. Armand had once; he gave me almost exactly the same description of an old bearded man surrounded by innumerable small children. A teenager from the same family who used to wash their

clothes near the dam had visions of him as well—she said the children were all dressed in red.[40] But as Claude's reaction to this story made clear, the story Rainibe was telling was even more familiar. Everyone had heard stories about people who had been mysteriously drawn into *Vazimba* pools, everybody knew the real meaning of the crabs. These were stories about mediumship. If you agree to eat with the spirits, you become their friend and companion from then on, when you need them, you can call on them for help. Usually, you become a curer, and a medium. If you refuse—as the Betsileo woman did in the story of Ranoro—your relationship is broken. "They might even kill you."

The imagery surrounding *Vazimba*—the forms they take when they appear—are so diverse that it is extremely difficult to come up with a simple, coherent account of them. *Vazimba* seem to contain an incredibly varied jumble of ideas and images. The best way to start, I think, would be to return to what I've said about *lolo* as disembodied desires or intentions. When ghosts appear, they do so because they embody frustrated desires, a yearning or a longing: the desire of the dead to live again, to play with children, or the sheer desire *for* children, to *be* children, manifesting itself in the urge to snatch them, to seize them as the visible emblems of everything the dead have lost. *Vazimba* too are a kind of ghost, and they too are notoriously fond of children. Like other *lolo,* they are nameless and normally invisible, they lack specificity or identity and can thus become pure representations of potential, and, hence, power. But they embody not only the capacity to act, but also the sense of lack that moves one to take action. *Vazimba* are more than nameless, it is the very absence of anyone to remember their names that causes their anger and bitterness, that makes them fierce *Vazimba*; their lack makes them what they are.

The image of the old bearded man surrounded by constellations of little children might be taken as an abbreviated icon of this relationship. An old dead man with no descendants, or whose descendants are all dead, or lost, or somewhere in another country, surrounded by innumerable images of what he doesn't have.[41]

The old bearded man was an unusual *Vazimba*. Normally, when *Vazimba* appear in visions, they are either hideously deformed, or they appear as extremely attractive members of the opposite sex. Either they are—like the female *Vazimba* that haunted the *rotra* tree below the village of Anosy—*sima,* harelipped, noseless, horrifying, lacking parts and thus representing a yearning to be whole; or they are images of that wholeness of perfection of beauty that inspires desire in others.

Irina recounts an incident that happened in 1967, when she was thirteen:

> Irina: I was minding the pigs. Down to the north of that nice tomb there. That land doesn't like pigs, but I didn't know that, and the *Vazimba* happened to come out. And I became completely unaware of what I was doing, and started stripping off all my clothes—panties, bra, no clothes whatever but stark naked I went off wading into the water. And after that it carried me off home like that, to the village with all those people, me naked . . . I certainly haven't forgotten that! What a disaster! [she laughs]
>
> After a while my parents realized I'd been struck by the *Vazimba* to the north of Ambohimandroso. I never developed a fever, but I did dream of him that night. There was this gendarme, really really black, absolutely black. And his hand was blunt, fingerless like this [she holds out a hand, fingers extending only to the knuckle] And it greeted me: "How do you do?" That's to say: it was like—me it happened to have taken a fancy to, it was just the pigs it didn't like.

Her face was terribly swollen afterward, but her family brought honey and candies to the spot; and although they were Protestant, got hold of some Catholic holy water to sprinkle on her cheek, and around the area of the pool. Soon enough the swelling disappeared, but from then on, it is strictly forbidden to go into that water.

In this case, desire for children is clearly beginning to shade into sexual desire—even if the horrific, mutilated gendarme is hardly himself an alluring figure.

An elderly medium from Arivonimamo, who like most mediums was of *mainty* descent, told me a similar story. She had been tending sheep as a girl, and was almost drawn into a rocky pool full of bright red fish. Fortunately, her father was not far away; he heard what was happening and dashed down to rescue her. Afterward she was bedridden for over a month, and haunted by fever visions of the pool's *Vazimba*. This was a woman who always made a great point of her Christian piety, and who was rather unusual for her blanket condemnation of *Vazimba*—they were all "demons" (*daimony*), she said minions of the Devil—but even so, after telling me the story she couldn't help but add, with a dramatic sigh: "But ah, he was *so* handsome."

Behind any medium, in fact, there was likely to be some such story of a *Vazimba* and a pool. One medium in Arivonimamo—a young man named Renée, also of *mainty* descent—told me he had become a medium as a direct result of being drawn into such a pool. He was a rather offbeat medium (he insisted that he only invoked the spirits of Sakalava kings, because all the Merina ones were witches); while he had a small devoted clientele in town, most of the more established *Zanadrano* considered him a rather silly person.

Still, his story conformed perfectly to traditional motifs. This pool, he explained, was not far from the village he had grown up in to the south of Arivonimamo. It contained the spirits of several Sakalava warriors who had died in Imerina fighting the French during the revolt of the *menalamba*, and who, being lost, had become *Vazimba*.[42] Among them, he said, was another, female spirit, who in life had been the sister of the first Malagasy saint, Rasoamanarivo Victoire.[43] She was a small woman, shapely and delicate with long flowing hair. What's more, her spirit had developed an enormous crush on him when he was a teenager, and began following him around. At first he was chary of her propositions ("what would my mother think if she found out that I was being followed by a ghost?") but in the end she succeeded in luring him into the pool, and there he remained submerged for several days.[44] It was during this time he met the Sakalava warriors, who asked him whether he wished to become a medium. When he agreed, they put him in contact with a series of other spirits, including a former gendarme named Patrique, and ultimately, the most famous Sakalava kings.

In Renée's story, and others like it, mysterious pools were things of infinite possibility. They opened up on an alternate landscape that threaded across the entire island of Madagascar, full of invisible forces and personalities. As several mediums explained the process, a *Vazimba* can open the way to a minor king like Lailoza, or any of the other curing spirits whose compounds are scattered across Imerina: Andrianony, Andriantsihanika, Ranoro herself. From there one can appeal to minor spirits, often, the companions or assistants of such royal spirits, or else move further upward to make contact with famous Malagasy kings like Andrianampoinimerina, the founder of the Merina state, King Andriamanalina of Betsileo, Andriamisara of Sakalava . . . The compounds that include their tombs are all called *doany,* which—I was told—is simply the Malagasy transliteration of the French word *douane,* "customs house." Such shrines, then, are very literally seen as portals to another country—a country more or less coterminous with the past, "Malagasy times," which still lurk as an invisible potential behind the visible world of today. At least in Imerina, the cult surrounding these *doany* is now overwhelmingly dominated by the descendants of slaves—who make up the vast majority of mediums, men like Rainibe himself, and presumably, his grandfather and grandmother as well.

The Flesh of Crabs

So one can see why all of us listening to Rainibe tell his story about his father's disappearing under the dam assumed this was really a story with a subtext. That was what Claude was really getting at when he asked about the crabs. Rainibe ducked the question. Of course, it is possible that he was not being completely disingenuous when he said that he didn't know the story's full significance. Rainizafibetelo died when his grandson was still young. It was his wife Razanamanga who had been head of household when Rainibe was growing up, and continued to live until the early '60s. Rainibe's current practice is derived from her *Vazimba*, not from his.

Rainibe's *Vazimba* was located in a spring, in the middle of a rice field called Ambararatra.[45] There was a small mound there, surrounded by reeds, and underneath, I was told, a hidden pool. Inside this pool, Rainibe told us, lived a crab.

> Rainibe: This crab, it's a red crab about so big [he holds out his first]. And it—it's a really deep hole there, a real pit. And it came to me in a dream. "Put up a barrier around that spring," it said. "Put up a barrier so the crab can no longer wander off." So he's in there. Inside. If we were to dig drainage gutters for that field, he'd be likely to get into those, you know. "He'd be able to break through," it says.
>
> Pigs we don't let touch the place. If there's any pig shit in the manure, then we can't use it.
>
> Razafy: Did you notice how we were spreading manure lately, a week ago today? And sure enough on Monday it came in a dream. "Put it far away, at least a meter away . . ." Because he doesn't like anything that's dirty.
>
> But we, you know, we've just inherited this thing. When the late Razanamanga was still alive, then each year when the rice was still green she'd buy suet at the market, and once the rice was about to sprout, you couldn't touch that place any more, because she'd put down the suet.
>
> But we have absolutely no idea what the real origins of the thing may be.

Razanamanga used to take care of it, Rainibe told us, in order to protect the surrounding crops and guarantee a bountiful rice harvest in that valley. Nowadays, his family has taken up the responsibility, though instead of buying suet they make do with a half bottle of honey every year. But that's all, he added. Claude did his best to draw him out on the subject—if it visits you in your dreams, he suggested, doesn't it do anything else for you? If there was someone trying to do you harm, perhaps, a witch, wouldn't it warn you of the danger? Rainibe was adamant. He was not about to be lead into any traps. No,

he said. There was nothing like that. "I absolutely do not serve it" (*tsy tena manompo azy mihitsy*).

Of course, just about everyone else in Betafo was of a different opinion on this matter. Not only did he use his *Vazimba* in his curing, it was the reason he had moved his entire family out to Anjakalambo in 1972, and created that little village there. It was not (as he had claimed) because open spaces were healthier for the children, it was so that his family would be near Ambararatra, so they could spend each waxing quarter moon out in the fields there, beating drums and giving it *hasina.*

> Nety: In the past, there were people who saw it—all decked out in beads, he was. And that rice field used to be really savage; no one used it. But now that they've been giving it *hasina,* it's gotten a lot milder.

In fact, the place had almost become a *doany* in its own right.

One theme that emerges in most stories about *Vazimba* is of containment. When one first becomes aware of one—when it plagues some child in its dreams—one gives *hasina* to contain it to a certain spot, to keep it from following the living. The imagery of underground pools, too, is all about containment: not only of the people pulled into and kept inside watery caverns, but even, Rainifara's insistence that his own *Vazimba* was mainly concerned with ensuring that barriers were installed so his crab would get into the drainage ditches and thus escape his pool and be able to move freely in the current of the river once again.

Itompokolahy Pascal

Rainitaba used to visit his descendants in their dreams, but there was at least one who was periodically possessed by him—or, anyway, by some *Vazimba*. His name was Rakotomalala Pascal, one of the last of the descendants of Rainitaba to reside in Andrianony. Pascal had died only a few years before, an old, poor man who spent most of his time working other people's fields or doing odd jobs for them. According to Germain, Pascal was epileptic. Usually his seizures were easy to control, but every now and then they'd strike when no one else was around and he'd be badly injured. Once he was hired to repair somebody's second-floor verandah, had a seizure, and fell on his head; he had to be rushed off to a doctor in the capital. On another occasion, he was cooking and ended up badly burned when his foot got caught in a charcoal brazier. That

time, too, he had to be taken to the hospital in Antananarivo. The last time he had been hired to dig up another man's rice fields, and had a terrible fall across his own spade. That killed him instantly.

Everyone knew about Pascal's epilepsy, but most of the people who knew him—including Armand—did not mention it immediately. What they would say, if you mentioned his name, was that Pascal would be periodically seized by a *Vazimba*. Whenever someone died, it would carry him off into the waters below the dam—the same waters where Rainibe's grandfather had once been carried. He would jump into the water and stay there until mourning was over and the body had been placed inside the tomb.[46]

According to Jean Marie, Pascal's episodes began one day while he and few friends had finished work and were taking a swim in a pool a little to the north of Ambararatra. Pascal dove underwater, and when he came up, told everyone he had heard the sound of rooster crowing there. He went down again and heard the same thing. No one else could hear it.

The spirit remained in contact with him, but it never developed a normal, articulate relationship; it would simply seize him unexpectedly and send him into fits, or diving off into the pool. Sometimes, when he could feel it coming on, and he would call up "the *fokon'olona,*" as Jean Marie once put it—effectively, the whole black population of Andrianony "to tell them that soon he would be going into the water."

"I still remember this," said Jean Marie, "it was something I really saw with my own eyes." It was usually around twilight, and people would come out bringing French bread and other offerings.

> Jean Marie: They'd carry out a *fanasinana;* the people would clap, the people would sing, and then he would slowly start to move, move, as the thing arrived, and started to come over him. And then suddenly he was gone—the thing would carry him off running into the night. And everyone, all those people, would all go tramping after him.

These were genuine *fanasinana,* with a chorus and rhythmic music and all the accoutrements of spirit possession. But the possession was peculiar. It seemed to only go halfway. Jean Marie was confused about the nature of this particular *Vazimba*.

> Jean Marie: He hadn't been in very good health, and then he honored the thing . . . But you'd think the upshot—if it were a real *Vazimba*, then its spirit really ought to have given him the means for curing. It should have said, "Let's make materials together that can cure people, so even when it seems like it's an

> incurable condition, I will be able to advise you what kind of herb to use . . ." But this *Vazimba* didn't do that. It just brought health to those it already happened to have afflicted. So when it came out, it would say, "These are the *fady*, the things that I don't like to eat, things I don't want you to do." So . . . I don't know if the *Vazimba* happened to like this particular person, or . . . That too isn't clear to me at all. I don't know.

Perhaps the *Vazimba* simply liked Pascal, much as it might take a fancy to a child, but in this case it couldn't be expelled, just propitiated by being periodically allowed to "come out" (*mivoaka*). "To come out" in this context means to take over a human being, who loses consciousness and becomes a vehicle through which the spirit can speak and reveal itself. But Pascal's *Vazimba* was oddly inarticulate. It never spoke through Pascal's own mouth, or if it did, its words were incomprehensible. Instead, Rainibe had to interpret them. In fact, it seems to have been Rainibe who really organized the entire business—his relationship with Pascal was the closest he ever came to accepting a public role as *Zanadrano* within Betafo: calling on everyone to assemble, interpreting the spirit's incomprehensible language—which usually, it turned out, consisted of demands on Pascal to refrain from chicken, pork, and other sorts of food. If anyone got real power or prestige from all this, it was he. Pascal himself remained a passive victim, taken to the threshold of power and simply dangled there, never quite able to turn the relationship around.

Or . . . perhaps this is not the best way to think about it. There are other things beside power, or anyway, beside the power to intimidate others or to bend them to one's will. Whenever Pascal announced he was about to have a seizure, crowds of people—almost the entire population of Andrianony, apparently—would dutifully file out across the twilit paths between the fields to assist in the ceremony. They were moved only by benevolence and neighborly concern—as any Malagasy would have said, because of love. What Pascal ended up doing, then, was to create an ephemeral community of healing, in which he acted out the collective sense of dislocation and dispersal they all shared—suddenly running off in random directions to throw himself in pools and currents—in order to let them chase after him and collect him back again. For years, the same little drama of dispersal and recovery was enacted almost monthly, again and again and again.

In part, Pascal's *Vazimba* confused Jean Marie because it was neither one thing nor the other: not quite a force of desire one can stifle, not quite a

companion who gives access to another world. It seemed suspended in some unstable way between the two. But *Vazimba* were essentially confusing. They did not so much represent an alternative between two things, or even a gradual transition where two things shaded together, but often, a zone of extreme confusion where things were capable of flipping back and forth unexpectedly into their opposites: anger and desire, love and hate, seduction and renunciation, healing and assault.

Vazimba are confusing, admitted Soanaivo (Norbert's son and Miadana's son-in-law). Take Rainibe himself. Once he was out there with his family invoking his *Vazimba*, everyone was singing and clapping, and suddenly the thing settled on his teenage daughter and possessed her instead. It's all very unpredictable. Sometimes the spirit will settle on you because it likes you, and then usually you end up becoming a curer; other times it seems it's because it doesn't like you, and it will just fasten on to you and give you problems for the rest of your life.

Some people tried to make sense of it by speculating there were good and bad *Vazimba*. The good-natured kind would help you, offer to make you a curer; the malicious sort would simply attack or kill you. Most, though, considered *Vazimba* to be essentially unknowable and unpredictable. It was their ambiguity, after all, that gave *Vazimba* much of their importance. This was something I already pointed out in chapter 6. Unlike royal spirits, *Vazimba* are capable of both killing and curing, therefore, a man who has one is not to be trifled with. In fact, many specifically drew attention to this fact when talking about Rainibe, and explaining why people from Betafo itself were reluctant to turn to him when they got ill: he charged quite a bit of money for his services, and if you went to Rainibe, you had to pay in full, because if you didn't, the *Vazimba* would not hesitate to punish you. On the other hand, this very capacity to reverse themselves, to turn into their opposite, made them dangerous even for those who made use of them—as Noely pointed out, if you're playing around with nameless spirits capable of violence, you shouldn't be surprised if one day the thing just turns around and kills you.

Sufficient to Raise the Dead from Their Graves . . .

I began my discussion of *Vazimba* with images of dislocation and dispersal. *Vazimba* are spirits that have lost their place, bodies, memory, their specificity, their name. They exist in water, unmoored; cast on currents instead of anchored

in the ground like the proper ancestral dead. But images of humans pulled into watery caverns, or even of Rainfara's crab walled into his underwater pit, are images of confinement. They are about fixing things in space. By containing something which is the essence of flux and dislocation, one creates the possibility of overcoming that dislocation and finding oneself a place.

Another theme that has emerged periodically throughout this book has been the connection between invisibility and power. The power to act and transform the world tends to be represented as something essentially ambiguous, unknowable, that which cannot be defined. It is essentially something negative, in the sense that it is defined primarily by what it is not. This suggests one way to think about the nature of *Vazimba*. The victims of ongoing violence and oppression, one might say, have been, in certain ways, negated. They have been denied something: a place, the autonomy to create themselves, to act of their own accord. But by capturing this negation, fixing it in certain powerfully effective images—like *Vazimba*, who are also defined almost entirely by what they lack—it is sometimes possible to transform it into a kind of power.

Mediumship itself can be seen in exactly the same terms.[47] In most of Madagascar, mediums are overwhelmingly women. In Imerina, I found, they were if anything slightly more likely to be men; on the other hand, the overwhelming majority of *Zanadrano* were *olona mainty.* For most white Merina, relations of command, in which one party is reduced to a mere vehicle of another's will, are something to be avoided, and the relations between kings and their "soldiers" are the very archetype of relations of command. *Zanadrano*, however, actively seek such relations out. After all, it is hard to imagine any state in which one is so completely the vehicle of another's will than in possession: mediums insisted that when the spirits truly "moved in" them, they lost all consciousness, and even afterward had no memory of what the spirit did or said. What's more, mediums were quite explicit about evoking these idioms; not only did they always refer to the spirits as kings or at least "*andriana*," they referred to themselves as the *miaramila* or "soldiers" of those kings. It was a way of using an image of absolute negation as a way of claiming power and authority. One need only think again of chapter 7, and the political importance of astrologers, mediums, and others with access to invisible powers, to realize how effective this kind of move can be. In this game at least, everyone agreed that black people had all the advantages.

In her life, Razanamanga had been among the poorest of the poor, a mother of laborers. No one I spoke to remembered clearly whether she had,

herself, been a *Zanadrano*, but she probably was, and her son Rainibe too was already beginning to practice by the time she died. Ever since, Rainibe has been manipulating the ambiguous powers that surround his grandmother's *Vazimba* to gradually win himself a solid place in the community. With the money he has earned through curing, he began buying up land in the valley around Ambararatra, field by field, to the point where he could settle his family there, and found his own little patriarchal community. At the time I was there, this was an isolated one. Everyone was suspicious of him; many said outright that he was a witch. But he was also a man surrounded by children, many of whom are likely to stay on. He and Razafy were careful to ensure his children got proper schooling, just as they always had their eyes open to commercial opportunities: investing in cattle, for instance, and selling the milk in town. They had already built a substantial tomb. If Anjakalambo does not break up over the next ten or twenty years, there seems every reason to suspect that within a few generations the scandalous talk will have been forgotten, and Rainibe will be remembered as a venerable *razambe*.

To create a place and a legacy is, I have to stress, extraordinarily difficult. There is no guarantee that even Rainibe will be successful in the end. But when things are this fluid, almost anything can happen.

Toward the end of the time I was visiting Betafo I discovered there was another of Rainitaba's descendants in Betafo. This was one of Razanamavo's sons, named Tratra. A few years before he had built a small house near where the settlement of Antandrokomby used to be. Everyone referred to Tratra as just a boy—by which they meant he was in his late twenties and as yet had no children of his own. Most of the time he was away in Arivonimamo, or off traveling, earning money, trading, looking for work.

I have already had occasion to mention him: he was the young man who claimed to be a medium, but whose claims were not taken seriously. I never managed to catch up with him, myself, to ask him questions—I really wish I had. Still, his very existence points to possibilities. If nothing else, it could hardly be coincidence that he chose to build his house only a few meters away from the reedy pool Rainitaba is said to have inhabited before he disappeared. If Tratra finds himself the means to establish himself in Betafo, if he becomes a little more adept at manipulating impressions, who knows what might come of it? Even Rainitaba's lineage might well once again become a presence, and its history, back to its origins, entirely reformulated once again.

THE DESCENDANTS OF RAINITAMAINA

9

At this point we can finally return to the problem posed in chapter 1: how it is that Betafo has come to be divided between two ancestors, one *andriana* and one *mainty*, so inimical to one another that mixing them together could only lead to catastrophe.

The *mainty* ancestor in question was named Rainitamaina. He was said to have been a wandering astrologer who, sometime in the early part of the nineteenth century, chanced to be passing through Betafo, and ended up locked in a magical battle with the *andriana* and their leader, Andriamaharo. In the end, he prevailed, and as a result his descendants stayed on and have had control of the weather around Betafo ever since. Yet at the same time, he has always had a difficult time sharing the territory with the people he once fought. To this day, Rainitamaina's body was not to be removed from his tomb to be exposed to the village of Betafo, or terrible things would result; even during funerals for his descendants, when the dead had to be carried there, it was forbidden to pass through Betafo on the way.

This much, everybody knew—though other elements of the story were certainly contested. People were also aware that his descendants now are by far the most numerous and important *mainty* lineage of Betafo: when I was there, they included fourteen households (grouped in three large families) between Andrianony and the village of Morafeno, and another in Arivonimamo, and ranked among their most prominent members Ratsizafy, the astrologer, Augustin, and Armand.

Ratsizafy was in every sense the head of the lineage. He was a man of extraordinary stature. Not only was he the richest man in Betafo, and one of the oldest, he was an astrologer and curer famous as far away as the capital. What's more, he was the direct successor to Rainitamaina: it was he who kept

Rainitamaina's hail medicine, who continued his avocation as astrologer and curer, who had built his current tomb and officiated over its ceremonial. So close was the identification that a number of people actually had trouble telling the two apart. The identification also took on political significance because many people spoke of Rainitamaina as if he was, in some diffuse sense, the ancestor of all the black people of Betafo; as a result, Ratsizafy himself became a sort of grand ancestral figure, their leader, a token of the unity of all those descended from Betafo's former slaves.

It was rare for anyone to know much about other people's ancestors. Rainitamaina's story, and Rainitaba's, were probably the only two everybody knew at least a little of.[1] This was because both gave shape to something that would otherwise be diffuse and inarticulate: Rainitaba's story, to the experience of loss and dispersal which is the legacy of slavery, Rainitamaina's, to the profound ruptures it had created within the historical fabric of the community.[2] But Rainitamaina's, at least, also had an ongoing political importance, and this poses certain problems of presentation.

When describing the history of a lineage, the obvious thing is to begin at the beginning, with the story of its founder. But this would be very difficult to do. Different members of the lineage told this story in very different ways, and to understand why they did so, one has to first understand their place within it, their interests and perspectives. In other words, one has to know a lot about the end in order to get at the beginning.

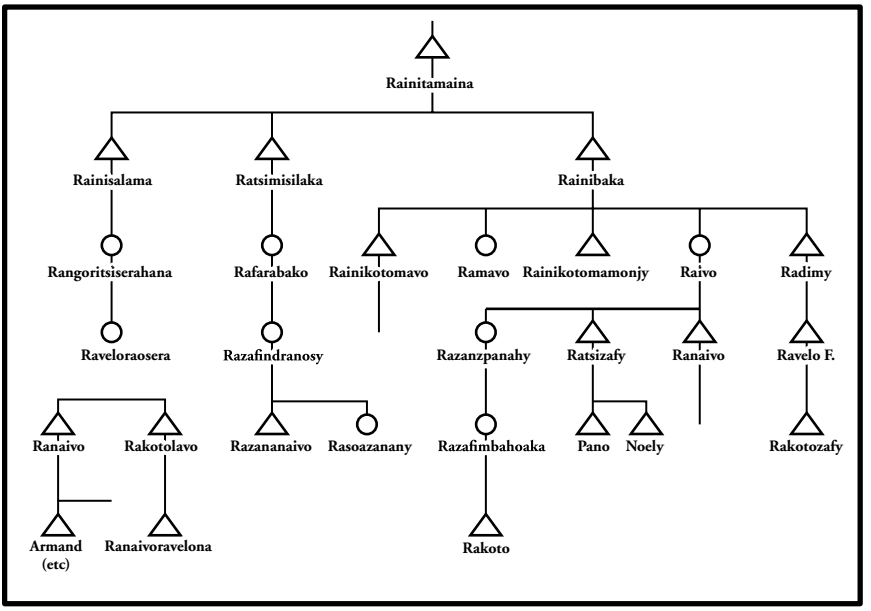
What I am going to do then, is this: first try to reconstruct the history of the lineage, then, tell the story of its *razambe*.

The Descendants of Rainitamaina

Rainitamaina almost certainly did exist. He appears to have lived in the early part of the nineteenth century. Descendants still remember the names of his children and grandchildren.

The genealogy below is highly schematic: I have only included those born in Betafo, and even left out several people whose descendants have all left. Still, it provides a framework for understanding the connections between those who still remained in Betafo and Arivonimamo when I was living there, and some idea of what the group has looked like over time.

Early documents suggest that Rainitamaina was indeed a contemporary of Andriamaharo,[3] and in fact, the earliest mention I could find of anyone included



9.1. The Rainitamaina lineage

in the genealogy above were from AKTA notebooks from the 1880s, which record how each one of Rainitamaina's sons (along with his granddaughter Rangoritsiserahana) were sold—in every case, by a member of the Andriamaharo family to some other *andriana*.[4]

Oral traditions insist that Rainitamaina himself had lived in a hamlet called Anosy, located on a kind of island of raised ground in the middle of the rice fields at the head of the long valley that runs through most of the southern part of Betafo's territory. There too he was buried, in a primitive chamber by the side of the fields.

Ratsimisilaka is said to have been a *mpampakatra rano velona,* an expert in manipulating streams and watercourses to transform the landscape (it was he, Ratsizafy told me, who had created most of the moats still visible around the local countryside, including the three around Betafo). His work kept him traveling. Oral traditions have less to say about the other two brothers, except that they were both at least occasional astrologers and *mpomasy*. When his father died, it was Rainisalama who got the hail medicine; when he died, it passed on to Rainibaka, who also received the family's modest estate of rice fields around Anosy.[5]

The children of the first two brothers did not, for the most part, stay on in the territory of Betafo. Rainisalama had only one child that anyone still remembers—his daughter Rangoritsiserahana; her daughter Ravelo Raosera spent much of her life as a wandering peddler. Ratsimisilaka is said to have had quite a number of children, all of whom, except for the one daughter whose descendants are still alive today, have been entirely forgotten. Ratsizafy claimed their line had been effectively destroyed as a result of Rainitamaina's *ozona:* almost all of those children had been thieves and ne'er-do-wells of one sort or another; because of their ancestor's cursing, most died young or ended up in jail. Even those who didn't died childless.

Rainibaka himself had five sons and three daughters, who apparently moved from Anosy to another hamlet called Morafeno, somewhat to the north. According to Ratsizafy (the only person old enough to remember this period in any detail) the eldest son inherited the medicine, but eventually grew tired of Betafo, and after a few years set out west to find his fortune.[6] The hail medicine passed to his younger brother, Rainikotomamonjy, also an astrologer, who died soon afterward, perhaps in 1910, passing it to his sister Raivo.

Raivo lived in Morafeno until she died in 1937 and brought up five children there. For a long time she was the only representative of the Rainitamaina lineage who was a full-time resident in Betafo. Most remember her as a rather colorful local personality; apart from protecting the crops, she was a midwife and specialist in women's medicine, and, according to some, a skilled amateur astrologer. Even so, her family was poor, among the poorest in Betafo.

Ratsizafy had few fond memories of his mother:

> David: And who was her husband in those days?
> Ratsizafy: She didn't have one. Don't remember . . . husbands in the grass. She was a real harlot.
> Chantal: So there were different fathers?
> Ratsizafy: Different fathers; I have no idea. None of them had fathers. Oh, she was a badly behaved woman, she was.
> David: Raivo?
> Ratsizafy: Really badly behaved. There weren't any men dared push her around! If she got mad they'd run away or she'd turn them upside down absolutely. She was big, you know, our mother . . . big and tall, and really violent.
> David: But she brought up a lot of children . . . I guess she did it well.
> Ratsizafy: Nah, she was hard on her kids, too. Beat on them.
> David: Oh, that's rough.

RATSIZAFY: Mmmm . . . the woman was badly behaved.

In Arivonimamo there used to be a fair—this was in French times. And there was one of those boxers from over in Antanibe: a big guy, really skillful with his fists. She happened by, and decided to enter the competition.

"Don't enter in that if you're a woman, you'll get yourself killed! Don't enter in there!"

They tried to stop her, but "No," she said, "let me go and try my skill!"

She wrapped the cloth around her loins. "You're going to get yourself killed, you lunatic! Enough!"

"Fine, then, if I die then my daughters will bury me. Let's fight it out!" The guy went at her, they say, but he couldn't hit her. Then the one time she landed one on him, he fell tumbling on the ground there to the south of the big *amontana* tree, and that's where he went a-rolling . . .

That's when they said "One, two, three . . . gone!" And the Frenchman gave her the prize for her victory.

And it was from then that people said "Watch out for that Big Raivo from Anosy. Watch out, because she's a disaster!"

Actually, Ratsizafy appears to have spent much of his childhood outside his mother's house. While the old hamlet of Anosy was abandoned in Malagasy times, around the turn of the century a number of *andriana*—almost all descendants of Andriamaharo who owned land in that valley—had left Betafo to found a new Anosy further up the hill. By the 1910s and '20s, when Ratsizafy was growing up, this village consisted of five or six households, among whom perhaps the most prominent was that of a man named Ramarozaka.[7] Ratsizafy spent much of his childhood minding Ramarozaka's cattle, doing his chores and running his errands in exchange for shelter, food, and clothing. Ramarozaka died childless, but Ratsizafy still remembers the man fondly as someone who "fostered" him (*nitaiza azy*); he always contributes cloth if there's a *famadhina* at his tomb.

In 1929, Morafeno consisted only of Raivo's house and one *andriana* household farther down the hill. Around 1935 Ratsizafy's older sister Razanapanahy built a house there, and his younger brother later built one as well. For a long time, then, Morafeno was made up almost entirely of Raivo's descendants. It is not clear, though, how often Ratsizafy himself was around. According to his own account, he had been a very a sickly child. In his third year he was so desperately ill that everyone considered his death inevitable, and his mother was forced to tote him on her back from curer to curer. Finally, at the recommendation of an *andriana* astrologer from Anosy named Rainikotozafy, she trekked up Mount Antongana, a famous mountain to the east, where there lived a famous *mpomasy* named Ingahy Volo. Ingahy Volo no sooner saw him

than he pronounced a *fira-vava,* a prophecy, that the child would someday be a famous astrologer:

> Ratsizafy: "Within the year this child will be cured," he said, and it was truly *masina* indeed. And the people were afraid then, for they saw Ingahy Volo was truly pronouncing words of prophecy. This is what he said: "He shall be a great astrologer" he said, "he shall work medicine," he said, "he will not do evil," he said, "so take him home once he's cured."
>
> So we went up to the west, me carried on my mother's back, and "Sit still!" my mother started saying, "are you shitting on my hip, or what? Sit still! Sit still!" she said. [Ratsizafy drawing back miming a savage gesture, open hand poised to slap]
>
> Chantal: And you were cured?
>
> Ratsizafy: And I was cured. But it was that Ingahy Volo, from Mount Antongona, who ultimately became my teacher. He and Rainibotokelimaso used to go at each other, back and forth—the two men both lived on Antongana. One on the north side, the other on the south side.
>
> Chantal: I take it the two of them were rivals?
>
> Ratsizafy: They were both *mpomasy*, the two of them. Rainibotokelimaso was building a tomb. As soon as he'd have the ground all dug out, Ingahy Volo up on the north side would have it all undone: break all the rocks into fragments. Hoooo! He'd send down the lightning and smash 'em all to bits.
>
> So then Ingahy Volo up on north side would try to make his own tomb, and all the rocks, all of them would be stripped away, stripped away, stripped away . . . Come morning, all the stones would be dancing around in four pieces each; he'd come back from work and there they'd be. That's how the two men used to entertain each other.
>
> Chantal: You were already grown up by then?
>
> Ratsizafy: Oh no, I never saw any of that. Ingahy Volo told the story.
>
> That Rainibotokelimaso, too: he used to dream without sleeping. If there was someone was coming to steal something from his house, it was: "Get out the baskets, if you will!" So the thief would be able to carry his manure for him. "Take out the shovels, please! Because there'll be men working here tonight!"
>
> Chantal: They'd end up having to work on his rice fields . . .
>
> Ratsizafy: Hooooo! It's a disaster, when it's medicine. "Put the shovels out to the west of the house!" he'd say, and the thieves would be out working his lands for him.

It is significant, I think, that Ratsizafy never once mentioned the fact that his mother knew astrology. The positive figures in his reminiscences were always knowledgeable men: Ramarozaka who fostered him, Rainibetsarazaka and Rainikotozafy, another aged *andriana* from the village of Anosy, who introduced him to the first principles of astrology; Ingahy Volo himself who prophesied and later became his teacher. While it was Rainitamaina, he said, who had given him his abilities, Ingahy Volo was the one who taught him the substance of his art. Apparently, after finishing primary school (he did know

how to read) Ratsizafy returned to Mount Antongana and spent years as Ingahy Volo's apprentice. It was there he learned his techniques of curing and divination, of astrological calculation, the art of placing houses and tombs in such a way as to avoid harmful destinies, which colors, plants, and properties corresponded to each of the twelve lunar months.

Even after he left Antongana, Ratsizafy did not return permanently to Morafeno. He practiced his trade all over Imerina, and even took voyages outside it (this is the time, remember, when according to the more scandalous rumors he used to go from town to town curing people his traveling companion had ensorcelled). In part, it was because he was never allowed to take the place he felt he deserved in Betafo. His mother died in 1937, when Ratsizafy was 31, but when she did she passed the medicine to his older sister Razanapanahy, who she had also taught everything she knew about astrology and midwifery. Razanapanahy, in turn, lived on until 1961. Ratsizafy only got control of the family medicine at the age of fifty-five—by which time he had already, by all accounts, been the preeminent astrologer of Betafo for as long as anyone could remember. He lived most of his life, then, in the shadow of powerful and independent women, and clearly resented it: the one thing he always insisted on when speaking of the hail medicine was that it was always handed from eldest male son to eldest male son, something which was clearly not the case. When I once started asking him about Razanapanahy (this was in fact before I knew that she had ever kept the medicine) his son warned me I would do well to avoid mentioning her name: "You'll end up upsetting daddy."

Not only was Ratsizafy shunted aside as head of the family, for a long time, he was also childless—which must have reinforced his sense of infantilization. In the '30s, he married a local *mainty* named Rasoavahiny.[8] The marriage never produced offspring, and they eventually drifted apart. It was only later, after he had finally come into his own and married an *andriana* woman from Belanitra, that he had his two sons: Pano (b. 1968) and Noely (b. 1970). By this time his fortunes had begun to turn in more ways than one; he was becoming wealthy from his curing, and buying up rice fields in the valleys surrounding Morafeno. This story, though, must wait for a little later.

Noble Wives and Military Pensions

Most of the lineage's members quickly scattered, at best spending some years of their lives working as sharecroppers or wage-laborers in Betafo itself, eventually

finding better opportunities elsewhere. Those whose descendants still remain always turned out, on investigation, to be people who had some unusual stroke of good fortune. Rainisalama's great-grandson Ranaivo (1904–1982), for example, was lucky enough to marry an heiress from *tampon-tanana.*[9] The marriage was infertile and she died a few years later, but through her, he came into land. Ranaivo—he was called "Ranaivo the Nail" because he was always putterring around fixing things—was much remembered around Betafo as a good-natured old man, always full of minor projects, whose decency and good sense made him the first person anyone would turn to if there were quarrels—whether *mainty* or *andriana*. He married five times before producing any children, but they were all still around in 1990[10]—by which time the family was headed by his widow (Razafindravao b. 1949) and eldest son, Armand (b. 1961).

Similarly, the descendants of Ratsimisilaka have been forgotten, except for the descendants of Rafarabako. Rafarabako herself was a peddler, her main occupation, I was told, was traveling from market to market trading in hot peppers and spicy condiments. But her daughter, Razafindranosy (1887–1987), married a Malagasy soldier just before he embarked to fight in the First World War; when he died in France, she ended up receiving a widow's pension for the rest of her very long life. While she never lived in Betafo, Razafindranosy kept up an active interest in the place from her home in nearby Arivonimamo (where she worked as an occasional grade-school teacher), never missing an opportunity to buy up rice fields, and two of her children—one son and one daughter—still live there and work the fields their mother bought.

Finally, there is the curious case of Ravelo François, Raivo's nephew, born in 1894. Ravelo joined the French army in 1914, and is said to have spent many years overseas. He returned in the early '20s, lived for a while with Razanamino[11] in Andrianony—just long enough apparently to produce a son—then disappeared again. Later Ravelo reappeared, armed with a substantial military pension, and took his son off to his current home, in a town somewhere in northern Imerina. The son, Rakotozafy Albert, thus grew up in a relatively prosperous milieu; he got something of an education; during his periodic visits to Betafo as a teenager, he must have been an alluring figure, sophisticated, worldly, well-dressed. When I was in Betafo everyone remembered him only as he was in the last years of his life, wealthy, a little proud, given to self-destructive romantic passions, but he must have once been an

unusually charming and attractive young man. Anyway there must be some explanation of how a black man who was not really all that wealthy managed to convince two different *andriana* women in a row to marry him. His first wife—originally from a village several kilometers to the northeast—was of a grade of *andriana* two levels above even those of Betafo. About the only thing most people really remembered about her is that she bore him one son and died almost immediately afterward (probably because of her ancestors' wrath for having married him). A year or two later he married Razafisoa, an Andrianamboninolona from Betafo. This was an incredibly advantageous match, because not only was she an *andriana*, but a fabulously wealthy one, the orphaned granddaughter of a former village notable and brother of the governor, Andriantonga. She was, in fact, the last of the descendants of the great *tampon-tanana andriana*. The marriage was infertile[12] but Razafisoa adopted Augustin, the son of his first marriage, and Augustin in turn grew up to marry an *andriana* woman from outside Betafo as well. By the time I knew him he had a number of children, all of whom he had managed to keep around him because of the resources his adopted mother put in his hands.

Land and Tombs

For most of the century, then, there weren't more than three or four families of Rainitamaina actually living in Betafo at any given time, and most of its most prominent members were women (or, in two cases, men who had married *andriana* heiresses). It is only quite recently that their numbers had expanded.

All this has only been possible because of the gradual accumulation of land. Much of it was made possible by Rakotonarivo Auguste, who, as noted in chapter 5, toward the end of his life gradually sold off almost all of his vast possessions—mostly, to descendants of Rainitamaina. It is hard to reconstruct what happened, but by the 1990s, almost all the land to the north and east of Morafeno was in the hands of members of the lineage—most of it in fact was owned by Ratsizafy himself—as well large chunks of the best land to the north, east, and west of Betafo itself—perhaps half of it. Ratsizafy and Augustin, who usually had access to cash, were both notorious for approaching impoverished *andriana* and offering to loan them money, hoping to seize their fields as collateral should they default; Armand's family was less unscrupulous, but were always looking for opportunities to buy.

By 1990, the recognized leaders of the lineage were all men: starting with

Ratsizafy himself, in Morafeno, Augustin in Andrianony, and Armand.[13] Only they, Armand once explained to me, could really be considered close to their great ancestor Rainitamaina, the founder of the lineage, because they were the only ones who dared to take that ancestor's body into their own hands during *famadihana*. All others were afraid.

This way of presenting things is significant—after all, if the group did manage to cohere, during the early years, it was because of the existence of a common tomb—which Raivo and some others apparently founded sometime around 1910, on a hill overlooking Betafo to the northeast, called Ambohitrimaninana. As the lineage gained in prosperity in the '60s, the first reaction was a burst of new construction there; the original earthen tomb has transformed into a complex of four in shiny white concrete, at their center, a vast new tomb dedicated to the *razambe* himself.

The history of the original tomb—called the *tsy idiram-binanto*[14]—was known to everyone. It had been created jointly by descendants of Rainitamaina, Rangorimainty, and Rainitaba. Most of the people who pooled their resources to found it were middle-aged black women, interested in preserving the memory of fathers or grandfathers recently deceased. The hill they chose is a shelf-like foothill of the mountain chain that looms behind Betafo's territory; an excellent location since it is not only to the northeast of the village of Betafo (the ritually favored direction) but clearly visible from most of its territory.

It seems to have stood alone there for over half a century, squared adobe reinforced with stone, with granite door and chamber hidden underneath. In 1968, however, Razandranosy—the woman with the military pension—had it rebuilt in stone, and rededicated with a particularly ostentatious *famadihana* many still remembered vividly. This was, however, just the beginning of a wave of expansion. A few years later Augustin's father Rakotozafy Albert—by then one of the wealthier men in Betafo—got together with Armand's father to build a shiny new stone tomb a few meters to the northwest, removing his own ancestors to be its *razambe*. In 1974, Ratsizafy built an even larger stone tomb of his own, directly to the north of the original, and transferred the body of Rainitamaina itself. Finally, in 1978, Ingahirainy relocated his own family tomb (which had been on the other side of the same hill) just to the north of Ratsizafy's, so that there were, now, four different white stone tombs all clustered together on the same hill overlooking the village of Betafo.

If a traveler approaches Betafo from Arivonimamo, the grassy expanse of Ambohitrimaninana with its sparkling white tombs is the first corner of Betafo's territory likely to catch her eye. As one draws closer, though, the central tomb is by far the most imposing. Most people from town immediately knew what I was talking about when I described it—many remembered it as having an odd, exotic, vaguely Moorish look. From very close it is equally impressive: a massive structure of unpainted granite blocks, fastened together by white concrete. What really made it stand out however was the fact that it had, effectively, two stories: above the tomb itself was a smaller granite structure with a peaked granite roof, resembling a house, which is where only Rainitamaina's body rests. Such a structure is referred to as a *trano manara* (a "cold house") and is a mark of royalty—in fact, it is forbidden for any but the most exalted *andriana* to put one atop their tomb.[15] Ratsizafy of course justified it by claiming that his ancestor was the son (or maybe grandson) of King Andriamanalina of Betsileo.[16] From an *andriana* perspective, then, for a black person to build such a thing would be an act of almost unimaginable pretension. I never heard anyone spontaneously bring up the matter; certainly, *andriana* did not go around muttering their indignation. But on the two or three occasions when I mentioned it to an *andriana*, the response was always a look of hopeless dismay, a depressed shrug—what could one even say?

One reason these tombs are so bright and well kept-up is that they were the object of almost constant *famadihana*. Since the late '70s at least, there has been at least one there every year—often, two or three. The beauty of the tombs is thus the visible evidence of incessant ritual activity, which has transformed the hill into a shining display of the newfound power and prosperity of Betafo's *mainty*. Certainly the *andriana* themselves have nothing like it. Besides them, even the tombs in the very center of Betafo, the most prestigious noble tombs, looked shabby and unkempt. But this display had another effect as well. The hill could at least be imagined as a place of origins similar to Betafo itself; and while no one actually claimed their ancestors had ever lived there, people did sometimes talk about "those people from Ambohitrimaninana" just as they might "those people from the *Telo Milahatra*." And this, in turn, made it possible to imagine Rainitamaina—its central and most ancient *razambe*—as the *razambe* of all Betafo's *mainty*.

This was also a center very much defined *against* the village of Betafo. The tomb ritual surrounding Rainitamaina seemed especially designed to maintain this opposition. When one of Rainitamaina's descendants died their

bodies could never be carried through Betafo on the way to the tomb; when the *razambe* himself was to be wrapped, it was forbidden to take his body outside the tomb; in fact, a cloth had to be hung across the doorway because if he was ever exposed to sunlight or caught sight of the village Betafo, either all rain would stop, or whirlwinds would strike the town. *Andriana* could attend tomb ritual, but they could not take part in the actual wrapping of the bodies. One key thing the stories about Rainitamaina did was to explain the origins of this opposition: why Rainitamaina and the *andriana* still did not get along.

Let me go on then to the story.

Rainitamaina: Who Gets to Tell the History

While just about everyone knew that Rainitamaina had fought with the *andriana*, and most, if asked, were quick to tell me this, usually throwing in some details about his tomb, few would go beyond that. Only a handful felt they had the right to tell the story.

Now, as the reader will no doubt have noticed, in rural Imerina, long continuous historical narratives are rare. For the most part, history took the form of little stories or bits of information attached to specific places: the family that owns this tomb, the *ody* that was once buried beneath this tree, the event this stone commemorates . . .—knowledge which almost anyone could claim. Since such places were constantly being discovered, reinterpreted, forgotten, history became a broken, scattered thing. There were few overarching frameworks connecting things together; even where there was, as in the half-effaced history of tombs, most people did not feel entitled to lay claim to it. All the more so with actual narrative accounts of the origin of demes or ancient kings, which only the most authoritative figures felt entitled to set forth.[17]

As the reader will no doubt also remember, such "official histories" tend to be almost completely purged of conflict: deme founders move about over an unpopulated landscape; situations of conflict are shunted aside, made ridiculous, or covered up. One of the things that makes the story of Rainitamaina so interesting is that it completely violated these principles. It was a story about a heroic contest in which the protagonists were *not* dismissed as childish, which had had repercussions lasting to the present day that are *not* dismissed as foolish out of hand. But this made it a very difficult story to tell. It made everyone uncomfortable. As a result, it took me a very long time to figure out exactly what the story was supposed to be about.

What follows then is in part a history of how I learned the story, taking each of my first five informants in turn. In the process, I also try to suggest why each narrator chose to tell me the story as they did.

Ratsizafy

I have already described my first meeting with Ratsizafy; how Armand first lead me to meet him in Morafeno, how he came up the hill with a woolen cap and a spade over his shoulder, an ancient man with a graying mustache, drinking freely from a hip flask. It is difficult to provide a broader summary of the man and his importance. In Betafo, Ratsizafy was a figure of almost mythic proportions. Not only was he the oldest man in Betafo, he was also the richest one, and an astrologer and curer whose fame attracted clients from the capital and beyond. He was also someone who no one claimed to completely understand; whose power was in fact to some degree derived from that fact; the sort of person whose neighbors spent a good deal of their time discussing, exchanging gossip about, speculating as to what he might be up to next.

Perhaps the best way to describe Ratsizafy is not to start with the man but with the place where he lived. Ratsizafy lived in the northernmost of three houses that made up the village of Morafeno.[18] From inside, Morafeno is a maze of walls, sheds, outhouses, sheep and cattle pens; almost any time you come there, there are likely to be workmen hammering or digging or climbing up and down on the steep paths that lead to the surrounding fields. Ratsizafy's own house was palatial by rural standards, painted white, with a pale green trim on its numerous doors and windows; inside, an elegant central stairway leads to spacious rooms tastefully appointed with what looked like antique French furniture. It was the sort of house where there always seemed to be something vaguely furtive going on. Half the time, while I was visiting, I would catch sight of people who were obviously from the city, in designer jeans and leather jackets, usually looking slightly embarrassed, and carrying little presents for the Ingahibe (as he was always called). People would periodically disappear upstairs to a private room for consultations. Often one heard muffled laughter in the distance, or sometimes, arguments. Young women would occasionally appear in doorways to peek at the foreigner, giggling, only to be shepherded away by one of Ratsizafy's two teenage sons. Bottles of rum, full or empty, were everywhere, and at any given time most of the people in the house were drunk. Ratsizafy himself was always in a greater or lesser state

of intoxication. This is what everyone always said about his household—those people don't even keep water in their house, where other people would drink water, they drink rum. The moment he wakes up in the morning the first thing he does is drink.

Conducting interviews in such a house was challenging to say the least. During the conversation with Chantal cited a few pages back, for example, when he told us about how he first became an astrologer, our conversation was interrupted on three separate occasions by a man who claimed to be a distant relative of Armand, who would stumble in and, in a longwinded imitation of formal oratory, announce that he was leaving. He kept asking us for our blessing so he could go. We'd comply; he'd disappear; twenty minutes later, there he'd be. The third time, Ratsizafy, interrupted in his anecdote, responded by softly intoning a little poem, a *hain-teny,* which sounded like an elaborate blessing but actually was a series of very elaborate insults to the effect that he was a babbling fool.

Often Ratsizafy would slip in and out of consciousness. Half of the interviews I had with him were mainly with his sons; Ratsizafy would be passed out on his bed, until something would catch his attention and he would flicker to attention, toss out some amazing fact or anecdote, then drift away into a self-satisfied haze, or else, seized by some unknown impulse, abruptly rise and leave the room. Occasionally too his wife would pass through, looking very demure and upright, giving orders to the workmen, but always too busy to talk.

I really cannot say how much of the apparent randomness was spontaneous, how much of it performance, an intentional effect. I do think Ratsizafy rather enjoyed having the appearance of chaos all around him. It suited a man who lived in the knowledge that his political significance manifested itself largely in being the constant topic of other people's conversations. Everything around him exuded the possibility of stories, and anyone who paid a visit to his household was sure to leave with something new to talk about. But clearly, this was not all calculated effect. Ratsizafy gave every sign of being a man who combined an unparalleled mastery of performance with a sense of not being entirely in control of himself or his surroundings.

During the last four months of my research, I never got to talk to Ratsizafy because he was laid up sick in bed. He had broken his hip while drunkenly trying to kick the cat. Now, the very fact that Ratsizafy had a cat was something I found peculiar. Ratsizafy hated cats. I first picked up on this

while his son Pano was explaining the "Malagasy" attitude toward God: that God is not purely good, he had created both the good and the evil. After all, it was God who made rats and vermin.

Ratsizafy raised his head from the pillow, calling out, "He made cats!"

"God," said Pano, "who created fleas, the plague, malaria . . ."

Ratsizafy: "He created cats!"

Yet unlike almost everyone else in Betafo, Ratsizafy had a cat. Supposedly it was just there to catch mice (though everyone had those), a scraggly, undernourished creature that would sometimes tentatively try to slide into the room while I was there, always to be greeted, if Ratsizafy was conscious, with sudden bursts of hostility, the old man sitting up and growling, open hand drawn back savagely as if to strike—a gesture I only otherwise saw in him when recounting his mother's beatings. Often, I was told, when very drunk, he'd run after it trying to kick it; often he'd miss, it was thus he broke his hip. Soon after, he developed a violent fever. The progress of his illness was, of course, closely followed by everyone in Betafo. He was always about to recover, then he would revert. He knew the medicine required; he would send his sons off to fetch this herb or that, the body would recover, but as soon as he was capable, he'd immediately start drinking heavily and within a day or two the fever would return and he'd be on his back again.

Even in the stories that he told, he would represent himself as small and vulnerable. When he spoke, his voice would start out quiet and subdued—as was typical of elders—but once he began to warm to a topic, it would usually alternate between impertinent and awed. Almost everything he said had an element of wonder in it, every anecdote something not entirely easy to believe. He might have been willing to boast of his ancestor's powers, to speak openly of conflicts—delivering bold assertions, outrageous stories with a kind of impish smile, eye half-cocked to monitor audience reaction—but even then, he would quickly switch to his typical pose: dazzlement, tinged with fear. His signature expression, one I never heard from anybody else, was a kind of soft, astounded "hooooo" sound, which he would throw in to his stories constantly, as an expression of speechless awe before some astounding force beside which he felt small. "Hooooo! It's a disaster, if it's medicine"—a comment which seems to sum the man up, coming as it does from a man who has based his entire career on being an expert in the stuff.

Even before I discovered that he had only become a full social adult at the age of fifty-five[19]—that he had spent most of his life as the brilliant prodigy

who nonetheless always had to defer to powerful and authoritative women—it occurred to me that Ratsizafy acted a little like a naughty child. It came out especially in his interaction with Chantal. Chantal, the reader will remember, was my frequent companion on trips to Betafo, especially early on. Though twenty-five years old, she conformed perfectly to the Malagasy stereotype of the strong-willed woman, accustomed to taking charge of things. Normally, she would also become meekly respectful in the presence of rural elders, but somehow, Ratsizafy had almost exactly the opposite effect. When he ignored her questions she would scold him like a disobedient child; he would respond by acting like one, telling her what she wanted to know with an almost fearful expression and then trying to sneak off the moment she looked the other way. One time I could have sworn she almost hit him. When afterward I asked her what in hell she thought she was doing, she seemed genuinely confused by her own behavior: "I know, I know. I'm sorry," she said, 'I just don't know what came over me."

If nothing else, this fits in with his notorious fondness for practical jokes, his alternation between cowering and self-assertion, his odd fascination with bodily fluids, even his drinking, which was rather in the manner of a ten-year-old suddenly allowed to have all the candy he can eat. In many ways, he seemed unable to believe his luck, that after all those years he was suddenly the greatest and most powerful man in Betafo, unable to completely believe that he was finally free of all constraints.

But let me return to my first visit to Betafo, when I first met Ratsizafy in the company of Armand and Ramose Parson. At the time, he told us the history of his ancestor Rainitamaina. It was very much an authoritative version—the sort of account which, as I pointed out in chapter 6, is normally defined almost as much by what's left out than by what it says. But in this case, so much was left out that I found it difficult to understand what the story was even about. So did Parson. Even after we'd transcribed the cassette and gone over it several times, we couldn't make sense of it. Part of the problem was that we had talked to him outside, and a strong wind had made sections of cassette inaudible. So we went back to Morafeno and had him repeat it all. But even that did not clear things up entirely. The odd thing was that it was not as though Ratsizafy was trying to suppress elements of conflict—the history was full of conflict—what was missing was motivation, any larger framework that explained what the characters had to with each other and why they were behaving as they did.

During the first interview, Armand had asked most of the questions. We started talking just to the north of his house, and Ratsizafy began by pointing to the tombs of Ambohitrimaninana, strikingly visible to our north. "Do you see the remains of the moat there?" he asked. There had once been a settlement there. In fact, that was the first place Andrianamboninolona settled on his arrival, along with another *andriana* named Andriananandro. "Ambohitrimaninana" means "hill of the contest" or "hill of competition," and it had that name because soon afterward the two of them had a great falling out about land. In the end, Andriananandro was driven off, and settled further west.

> Ratsizafy: He ran away and headed west. And while he was heading west, there was a brush fire; and the *tapia* trees were all full of *bokana* [caterpillars], and they all started jumping out of the trunks of the trees. So he started stuffing himself full of *bokana,* on and on—until finally he got sick of them. So he cursed his descendants never to eat *bokana* again.

The story, of course, is the same one that everyone else tells of Andriamasoandro, and in fact Ratsizafy is collapsing the two figures into one—as he himself admitted, when I later pointed it out. "Andriananandro, Andriamasoandro . . ." he shrugged impatiently, "same thing."

Then later, he said, there was another fight, between Rainitamaina, and Andrianamboninolona's descendant Andriamaharo. As for where Rainitamaina came from, or why he was fighting with the *andriana* in Betafo, he offered no suggestion; he merely described how each in turn cursed the others' crops:

> Ratsizafy: Our grandfather fought with the people on *tampon-tanana;* they went at it again. Another fight.
>
> It was Ingahibe Andriamaharo who cursed our ancestor: "for seven years," he said, "you won't eat manioc, you won't eat beans, no corn, no this, no that . . ." And the crop sprung up leafy, but when the year was over they found the manioc plants had no fruit, the bean stalks had no beans—because of Andrianamboninolona and Ingahibe Andriamaharo's having cursed them.
>
> So our ancestor replied in kind. "For seven years," he said, "you'll eat no rice." And this is what he did, our grandfather, Ingahibe Rainitamaina: as soon as the rice began to sprout, he would send the hail down on it. And not a stalk of rice was left, because as soon as it began to sprout, he'd destroy it all with hail.
>
> Finally the *fokon'olona* from here came to concede to him: they brought a white bullock with a red head to sacrifice, and only then were things put straight between the two.

By "the *fokon'olona,*" he apparently meant Andriamaharo's party, the population of Betafo, whose rice had been destroyed and thus had little choice. Even

so, as the next anecdote made clear, the conflict was not entirely resolved. When Rainitamaina died, he was buried in a makeshift "tomb" near Anosy, having cursed his descendants that when they built a real, stone tomb, never to place it to the south of his rival's. Even afterward, when they were moving his body to the new tomb, and tried to pass near *tampon-tanana*, there were problems:

> Ratsizafy: And this.
>
> Our grandfather said: "If you build a stone tomb[20] (because those are our family's tombs, the ones there on that hill)—"if—if you build a stone tomb, don't place me to the south of that man. I'd rather stay buried in this hole than it be that. If you build one, put me to his north."
>
> So when they built one, it was over there to the north [at Ambohitrimaninana].
>
> And when he had agreed to come out and be conveyed there to the north, and they were carrying him there, they found they couldn't lift him any more. "Hey, wait up, let's stop this for a while—he's too heavy. Really heavy." The bearers put him down, panting, huh, huh, huh. They had been about to trod on Andriamaharo's compound. So they carried him the long way around, past here, when they did so he suddenly became light again.
>
> It was then they realized: he really didn't want to trod upon that land.
>
> And even now, if Rainitamaina comes out of the tomb and is caught by the light of day, there will be no rain. That's how it is.

I heard Ratsizafy tell this story three different times, often broken into episodes, usually with people crowding in to ask questions in between. But he always began with the story of the *andriana* fighting, and the caterpillars, then went on to the two other episodes: the cursing contest, then the transfer to the present tomb. Since there was no obvious connection between the characters of first two stories and the second two,[21] it is hard to resist the temptation to conclude that Ratsizafy was simply trying to place his own ancestor on a larger historical stage—making Rainitamaina's story part of the story of how other, more established, *andriana* groups found their place in the region.

But why the story about the caterpillars—which practically everyone in Arivonimamo knew wasn't really supposed to be about Andriananandro anyway?[22] Here I think the main reason was to introduce the theme of cursing, or *ozona*. Thematically, at least, the four episodes do form an elegant little series:

1. Two *andriana* fight each other
2. An *andriana* curses his descendants

3. Rainitamaina and an andriana*andriana* fight each other by means of cursing
4. Rainitamaina curses his descendants

Not only is Ratsizafy trying to establish an equivalency between his own (supposedly *andriana*) ancestor and others of the region, he is trying to establish an equivalence between two forms of action which are normally considered nearly opposites. Cursing is perhaps the ultimate expression of ancestral authority; fights and contests the very sort of childish behavior ancestral authority is properly meant to squelch.

From this perspective, everything is constructed around episode 3, in which Ratsizafy's ancestor and the *andriana* engage in a contest of *ozona*, each casting an aggressive restriction on the other. This was an extremely unusual way to use the term. One could speak, loosely, of insults or imprecations cast on some unrelated person as *ozona*, but such curses were not thought to have the power to wither anybody's crops. And in fact, there was a hint in the story that the power behind them was not ancestral power at all: Rainitamaina, at least, did not destroy his rival's rice crop by the sheer power of his imprecations but with hail. Since it was a matter of common knowledge that Rainitamaina had created a hail charm, an informed listener would probably be able to figure out that the term *ozona* was here being used very loosely indeed, that really it was this medicine that destroyed Andriamaharo's crops. But Ratsizafy clearly didn't want to talk about the medicine. He wanted to represent the two as engaged in a battle of ancestral powers; in effect, a struggle to determine which had more seniority, which was more ancestral.

Even the final curse, in which Rainitamaina tells his descendants never to build a tomb to the south of Andriamaharo's, can be interpreted this way. North (like east) is the direction of seniority. A man must never build a house to the north of his elder brother's or sister's, just as he must never build a taller one. The *tsy idiram-binanto* is indeed to the northeast of Betafo, to the north of all *andriana* tombs in fact.[23] But the final coda to the story—about the body becoming heavy, about Rainitamaina's determination *not* to pass above his rival—provides a curious counterweight. A direct path from Anosy to Ambohitrimaninana would normally lead one to pass either through, or quite close to, *tampon-tanana.* It was just as the bearers were approaching there that, according Ratsizafy, the body would not allow them to continue. Rainitamaina

did not wish to "trod upon" his rival's land. In the end they were forced to take an extremely roundabout route, passing through the present Morafeno to the main road that leads north to Mount Ambohidraidimby, then doubling back just below the mountain so as to approach Ambohitrimaninana from the north. I will deal with this incident in more detail later on (it is very telling) but if nothing else, it makes it clear that the issue is not simply one of Rainitamaina's dominance. It is more a separation of spheres, implying a tacit respect for, or at last recognition of, his rival's claims to space.

Additional Episodes

These four episodes—confusing though they were—comprised the core of Ratsizafy's version of local history. But as with most official histories (for instance, Rakotovao's) there were two layers to it; the initial story only really made sense after one asked the right questions afterward and teased out the additional episodes. What was unusual was that here, it was the elements of conflict that was presented first; and details about the origins and movements of the *razambe*—everything, in fact, that was foregrounded in other official histories—that only came out later.

So of course we asked: who was Rainitamaina? Where did he come from?

Rainitamaina was Betsileo, said Ratsizafy. Now, the literal meaning of Betsileo, *be tsy leo,* was "many not fed up."[24] Ratsizafy had a story about the origin of the name. It went back to the times of King Andriamanalina. One day Andrianampoinimerina, who ruled over Imerina, threatened to send an army against Andriamanalina. He sent him a thousand wooden buckets, with a challenge: if Andriamanalina's people could fill each bucket with spit, he would not make war against them. The king assembled his people and had them spit and spit until the buckets were all half full. Not good enough, said Andrianampoinimerina, and sent them back again. Finally all his people gathered and spent days doing nothing but spitting into buckets until they could send them all completely full. "There are a lot of those people," the Merina king remarked, on receiving them, "and they don't get tired easily!"

After telling me this story, Ratsizafy proceeded immediately on to the story of a disastrous *kabary*, or public assembly, held just to the south of the king's capital city of Fianarantsoa. "Our real origin," he said, "was Andriamanalina."

> Ratsizafy: He always wore a big hat, and kept it pulled down like this. Absolutely no one ever got to see his head. One day he was holding a *kabary* by this big river when suddenly a huge wind rose up, like a whirlwind. It swept the hat

> away and—everyone saw that his head was totally flat. "Look," they all said, "Ingahibe Andriamanalina is a flathead!" And he said, "I gotta go, I gotta get out of here . . ." they say—and then he jumped into the river.
>
> They searched and searched for him. "Aren't we even going to find his body?"
>
> He plunged into the water, and the people at the assembly all scattered to search the river up and down. Carried away by that flat head of his, he preferred to die there, and become a *Vazimba*.

The allusion to *Vazimba* seems peculiar—in fact, the whole incident seems rather whimsical, unless considered as part of the story of Rainitamaina himself. Ratsizafy insisted Rainitamaina was a son or grandson of this king. Betsileo had descended into civil war ("in every town, they say, the people were all killing one another") and he had run away in fear. Lost in the deep grass, pursued by enemies, he was finally guided to safety by the cry of a *katoraka,* a kind of wren (which, Ratsizafy explained, we descendants are not allowed to eat). "Our grandmother" Ravola had a similar story. She was originally from the Sihanika country to the northeast of Imerina, a beautiful young woman and a notoriously diligent worker. Ravola could weave mats in her sleep. She would go to sleep at night and her fingers would keep working, so three or four would be finished by the time she woke up in the morning. As a result, an important man tried to force her into marriage, and she too ended up running away into the forest; she too got lost, but was finally guided to safety in Imerina by the cry of a *sorohitra* bird ("we're not allowed to eat them either"). It was there, in Imerina, that she met her future husband, Rainitamaina.

While Ratsizafy insists that his ancestors were never slaves, these stories manage to reproduce almost exactly the sense of loss and displacement integral to slavery. Andriamanalina vanished into the waters and became a *Vazimba*; his descendant Rainitamaina abandoned his ancestral lands amidst scenes of endless murder, to come to Imerina as a friendless refugee; Ravola fled the threat of rape and violence. They were all lost people. But as in the case of *Vazimba*, these images of loss and displacement ultimately become a source of power.[25] Rainitamaina, when he was alive, was a skillful *mpomasy*, a curer, an astrologer, a man who knew how to control the weather and protect the crops. Now that he is dead, he continues to have these powers, and grant them to his descendants: his spirit continues to "press down on" Ratsizafy and his sons to advise them in their curing, the rituals they perform to renew the *hasina* of the hail medicine continue to be carried out before his tomb.

In fact, most of Ratsizafy's stories about his ancestor refer to specific features of this tomb—the tomb Ratsizafy himself constructed. His emphasis on King Andriamanalina (a Bestileo king who, as Ratsizafy points out, managed to hold his own against his Merina counterpart) is justification for the *trano manara,* the little house which is the tomb's most striking feature. After telling the story of Ravola, Ratsizafy went on to explain that she was only the first of four different wives—a fact which he held out as proof of the man's extraordinary *hasina.* All of them have since been wrapped together with him in the tomb.

On another shelf of the same tomb are the bodies of two *menakely*, named Rakotobetrafo and Ralahy, whose bodies were originally buried in the same primitive tomb near Anosy that originally held Rainitamaina. Ratsizafy transferred the bodies in 1985. These two are not said to have been Rainitamaina's kin; rather, they seem to have functioned much like the "soldiers" who surrounded the tomb of his rival Andrianambololona, and most other prominent *andriana*. They were basically a mark of status.

When I asked about the exact nature of these *menakely*, though, Ratsizafy was careful to insist that unlike the ones buried on *tampon-tanan*, these were not slaves, they were more like what one would normally think of as soldiers:

> Ratsizafy: We had our enemies, like Ingahibe Andrianamboninolona. He would try to attack our ancestor, so he had *menakely* to shoot back at them. So in the end they didn't dare to attack, both sides just stood their ground.
>
> Theirs were here to the north, ours below, to the south.
>
> David: So it was the *menakely* who were to the south?
>
> Ratsizafy: Both of them had *menakely* to protect them. Our man had guards over there, Andrianamboninolona had his guards as well. But our ancestor's words were really sacred: "They shall not pass beyond this road," he'd say. And sure enough, as soon as they'd reach there, they'd turn back. He'd prepared it so they would.
>
> Because whatever skill the other man might have, Rainitamaina had it too. "Don't be afraid," he said.
>
> "We'll die, man!"
>
> "Don't be afraid. They'll never make it here. They can't. No matter if a hundred men come down that road, they'll turn back before they get here."[26]

This little fragment, in which Rainitamaina reassures his followers that his rival's soldiers will never manage to cross into his territory, is the only story Ratsizafy told which had anything to say about Rainitamaina's life in Anosy. In a way, it can be seen as the counterpart to the story about his body becoming

heavy when his bearers tried to take him through *tampon-tanana.* In the latter case, Rainitamaina was unable or unwilling to pass from Anosy to the heart of his enemy's territory; in this one, his enemy's forces are unable to pass from *tampon-tanana* to the heart of his. The image of a stand-off, two equal forces unable to best each other, cropped up constantly in Ratsizafy's stories—as it did, for instance, in his story about two wizards of Mount Antongana, or (as we will presently see) in his way of talking about his hail medicine, which had an equally powerful rival on the other side of the mountains. It was as if, despite his story about the *andriana* conceding to Rainitamaina, he did not really believe his own ancestor fully capable of overcoming them; the best he could hope for was a kind of ongoing, hostile equilibrium.

Rainitamaina according to Augustin

After my fourth or fifth visit to Betafo, Miadana passed me on a message. Someone in Andrianony—the ex-*President Fokontany*, and current vice president—wanted to talk to me. Apparently he had heard a foreign researcher had been poking around, asking questions about local history, and wanted me to know he was at my disposal if I wished. Later I got a similar message from Armand.

This was extremely unusual. Normally, even the most knowledgeable elders would claim ignorance when I first asked about local history; certainly, I had never, anywhere, had someone seek me out. But Augustin was unusual. He was a man who had sought the office of *President Fokontany* when only thirty-two (during his term of office most people in Betafo used to refer to him with the nickname Ikoto Prez, roughly, "Kid President"); now only about forty, he still behaved like the president, at least of the northern half of the *fokontany*, and seemed to feel it would have been a definite blow to his stature if an outsider passed through the community without recognizing his competence to represent it.

So I went.

Now, I still find Augustin a bit of an enigma. He seemed an eminently serious man. Efficient, businesslike. He drank, but never to excess. He could laugh, make jokes, but when he did, there always seemed something grim about his humor. People would gather outside his house in Andrianony and he would sit and play cards or dominos with them, beside the large mechanical threshing machine in his yard and the ox cart that was usually parked beside it, but even

then, he seemed never off his guard. Of course, it might have just been my presence. But everything about him suggested a man burdened with a sense of, if not the tragedy, at least the profound difficulty of existence—which was odd because as far as I could make out, he had not had a particularly tragic life. Actually he and his family were doing rather well. He had an attractive, somewhat younger wife—an *andriana* from a nearby community—and several handsome, likable children. Two of the boys had just married, but seemed likely to remain around him in Betafo. When I would visit him his family would circulate, smile, but never do anything to interrupt the complete authority with which he spoke. He seemed entirely in charge of what was around him.

His version of local history, for all that, was more than a little bit uncertain. When Parson and I first came, he began by explaining that he was a descendant of Rainitamaina.

Augustin: Our grandfather was called Rainitamaina. He was Betsileo; that is, by origin, he was a descendant of the Betsileo king Andriamanalina. In fact, the king was his father. But he ended up leaving to come here, because, he said: "There are too many people here, I can't stand it any more, I think I'm just going to move away a bit because they're too many."

It is he who was considered the *Ray amandReny* of the people who lived in this village and its surroundings. He married a Sihanika woman, named Ravola. She was originally from Ambatondrazaka. Now she's buried here with him, and the bodies of all four of his wives are wrapped together with him up there to the north. Because the man had several wives. Some of them were Merina, from here.

That's how it is with him.

Even to this day the people here are still giving him *hasina* because . . . of the crops. Since it was he who kept the *ody vato* for the area surrounding here—the hail medicine. And also, he has quite a number of descendants that all trace back to him—myself, on my father's side, for instance. That is, his eldest son was the father of my father's grandfather . . .

[A brief discussion of genealogy follows. I scribble names in a little notebook.]

Back then he used to live in Anosy. And he argued . . . there was a man who quarreled with him down there, a man who lived just below *tampon-tanana,* in Antsahasoa. To the west of the tomb of Andrianamboninolona, that's where this Andriamaharo lived. The two had a contest of *fahaizana,* as sometimes was done under the old Malagasy government, over . . . Well, it was like they didn't get along; each was stubborn and pig-headed and that's what really got the whole thing started. So once they were quarreling, this Andriamaharo fellow made it so he couldn't grow rice (which they used to grow on the hills back then), and once he'd done so, Rainitamaina answered back, saying, "May you people be absolutely unable to harvest any rice for . . . two years, or three years." And that is indeed what happened, so by the time the year was out, none of them on one side, here in Betafo, had any rice, so they had to approach him to concede.

> And having conceded . . . Well, when he died (he was still in Anosy when he died)—they carried him around on the highway, and placed him in his tomb to the northeast; he wouldn't pass through this village. Because Andriamaharo had lived right up here, so they were not allowed to take him through his village; it was a place he didn't like. After all, they were people who'd argued, that is, rivals; that is to say, each still clung to their rights and powers [*fahaizana*], so: "As for me," he said, "I'll take the far road, because that road will get me there just as well."
>
> In the present day, the other man's descendants have all died out. He has no descendants left to take care of him anymore. While as for Rainitamaina, just about everyone here, and in everyplace we can see surrounding us within this *fokontany*, then for just about every one of them it is he who takes care of the *ody vato* for them. To this day where we stand here now.

While Ratsizafy seemed to rather enjoy telling the story of Rainitamaina's battle with Andriamaharo, the subject clearly made Augustin uncomfortable. But he was in something of a double bind. Telling this story was a way of playing the role of elder, of establishing himself as a representative of the community. But normally one does this by making oneself the embodiment of communal solidarity and, hence, denying any appearance of confrontation or conflict. In a community where many people were not even on speaking terms, this was very difficult to do. Itinerants like Ranaivo the Bolt could take on the voice of an outsider, inveighing against the conflicts within the community, and the violence and corruption it produced, but Augustin was a political leader, and anyway, his ancestor's history was about the origins of these very conflicts. Hence the stops and interruptions, the scrambling for words.

It's not that Augustin was an incompetent speaker. Actually he was an orator of some local note. But he was in a very difficult position here. However much he felt compelled to play down the elements of conflict in the story, he also knew that without them, there wasn't really any story left.

When forced to speak about a situation of historical conflict, narrators would normally take one of two different tacks. They could represent both parties as childish and unreasonable; or they could represent the matter as one of the mighty oppressing the weak. At first, Augustin appealed primarily to the former. As soon as he starts to talk about the reasons for the two men's quarrel, he pauses, as if trying to figure out how to possibly excuse such behavior, or how much of the story he really needs to tell; then apparently deciding he has little choice: well, he says, really it was nothing more than foolish pride, the desire to show off their skill in medicine.

Others, who had less of a stake, were even more inclined to make the story ridiculous. This was particularly the case among *andriana*. Irina once told me she'd heard the whole thing started over a chicken and some beans. One man's chicken had eaten some beans the other one was growing; when the man saw what was going on, he grabbed a handful of remaining beans and threw them at the chicken, killing it . . . One thing led to another. People can be that way sometimes.

Much of the point of representing past conflicts as foolish quarrels is to suggest that nothing more should have come of it; certainly, there's no reason for anyone to hold a grudge, for the matter to create divisions.[27] Augustin does try to do his best to minimize ongoing conflicts—he tries his best to play down the story of the road, doesn't even mention the taboo on looking at Betafo—but here his task was especially difficult. Ultimately, in order to create some kind of image of a solidary community, he had to make a lot of statements that, taken literally, could not possibly be true. In subsequent conversation, for example, he did his best to imply, without explicitly stating, that Rainitamaina was the ancestor of *all* Betafo's black people.[28] (It was easier to do because of the importance of his tomb, and the way people talked of most of the other *mainty* tombs there "coming out of" it.) Second, he suggested the *andriana* were no longer in Betafo: the majority had moved away, took government positions in the city, at best they came around once a year to pick up their third of the harvest from their sharecroppers.

This latter was an obvious fudge; he was really, of course, referring only to the fate of the very wealthiest *andriana* families, slave owners, and government officials: the Andriantongas, Ralaimanarivos, Rabe Leons. But since this was what the word *andriana* first of all evoked in people's minds, it enabled him to shunt aside the inconvenient existence of the much larger population of impoverished *andriana* farmers, and to pose as the representative of an unbroken community of black people, centered on the ancient village of Betafo, rather than one wracked by internal divisions. (At least in front of visitors like us, who were probably just passing through.)

Having already heard Ratsizafy's account, Parson was suspicious:

> Parson: And there aren't any prohibitions: for instance, the descendants of Andriamboninolona not being allowed to marry the descendants of Rainitamaina . . . ?
> Augustin: No, they really get along perfectly well nowadays. The one little thing that, as it happens, does linger on to affect us in the present day, is this: when the

> great man's body (that is, Rainitamaina's body) is taken out of the tomb, the descendants of Andrianamboninolona are not allowed to receive it. Or, really it's just the descendants of that loudmouth Andriamaharo who absolutely can't receive it—generally speaking.

In emphasizing the good relations between the descendants of Rainitamaina and the *andriana*, Augustin was again mainly referring to descendants of the "great" *tampon-tanana andriana*—absentees like Rahoby, Elizabeth, Esther. Augustin's own position as their trusted agent in Betafo, looking after their tombs and rice fields, was itself testimony to those good relations. But in the end, he could only take this line of argument so far.

First of all, the story had to have a villain. It was not just the story of two men being equally foolish; Augustin's ancestor was clearly the winner, and his subsequent prominence was certainly meant to imply he was the one who was ultimately in the right. Hence, in speaking of Andriamaharo himself, Augustin tended to revert to the kind of rhetoric usually reserved for stories about wicked kings and similar oppressors: because of his misdeeds, he has been punished by being left without posterity. His descendants have almost all died out. The crumbling walls surrounding the empty compound of Antsahasoa were the visible proof of their downfall.[29]

Actually, both Ratsizafy and Armand had on one occasion or another suggested roughly the same thing: though the way they put it, it was Rainitamaina's *ozona* that had caused Andriamaharo's descendants to die out. But Augustin himself never put it this way. In fact, one of the more striking differences between his account and Ratsizafy's was that he never used the word *ozona* at all, even when referring to the contest. He spoke of it as a contest of *fahaizana,* a word which in that context could only mean knowledge of the use of medicine. It was a magical contest, though in this matter he too provided no further details.

Conversations with Armand

It was Armand, of course, who first introduced me to Ratsizafy, but it took me some time to get his version of the story. For one thing, he didn't much like telling stories. Narrative was not a genre in which he felt comfortable. Moreover, as a young man of twenty-nine he did not really feel entitled to tell the official version of his ancestor's history. That was why he had taken me to Ratsizafy to begin with.

Once I had spoken to Ratsizafy, however, Armand was perfectly willing to provide commentary. This was the role that agreed with him: he rarely volunteered information, but after I discovered something, he would always be happy to venture an opinion. Almost inevitably, he would preface his comments by explaining that this was not quite what his father had told him about the matter—his father had, after all, been born in 1904, two years before even Ratsizafy, and had during his life been considered a great authority on local history.[30]

Mostly I had to make do with brief snatches while Armand was hurrying back and forth from work. Still, even these clarified a lot. It was Armand, for instance, who had told Parson that Rainitamaina had cursed his descendants never to marry those of Andrianamboninolona. Sometimes they marry anyway, he admitted, but if so, the marriage is inevitably infertile. Look at his own father's first marriage—sterile—or Augustin's father's marriage with Razafisoa.

He had also told us a lot about tomb ritual—this was another reason Parson had been suspicious of Augustin's way of representing things. Rainitamaina did not like *andriana* from Betafo to attend his *famadihana*. Take the late Rasaona (the minor official who had once been the most prominent man from Ambaribe). When drunk, Rasaona would become full of benevolent love for his fellow human beings. One time he insisted on helping to wrap Rainitamaina; Ratsizafy was going to indulge him, but when the diggers tried to open the door to the tomb, it wouldn't budge. Armand also confirmed an anecdote Miadana's family had told me: not only must a cloth be hung over the door whenever Rainitamaina's tomb is opened so he doesn't see Betafo, but once, in 1985, when a breeze blew the cloth momentarily aside, a whirlwind arose and struck Betafo, wreaking minor havoc and knocking over several spectators sitting on wall.

The main thing Parson and I wanted, though, was to clarify the original story. What was the real cause of the quarrel? At first, Armand said he didn't really know. Well, what about the way that they cursed each other? That didn't seem to make much sense. Andriamaharo placed a curse on Rainitamaina's beans and corn; Rainitamaina cursed Andriamaharo's rice. Was Andriamaharo just stupid, or what? Why curse beans and leave the rice alone?

Armand explained that Rainitamaina didn't have any rice to curse.

> Armand: Ingahibe Rainitamaina, he was Betsileo, a newcomer. So he didn't have any land in Betafo—all he had was manioc, beans, corn, taro . . . Hill crops. Rice fields he didn't have. So when he cursed him, it was: "May your manioc

come to nothing for two, three, four years . . ." And the manioc grew but there wasn't any fruit. So Ingahibe Rainitamaina was angry too, and he also knew how to work this hail medicine. So he was angry and he answered back: "May you not harvest as much as a grain of rice for seven years." And they really didn't. Because whenever they would grow something, the hail would pummel away at it, it would be destroyed by hail.

So in the end they each blew water on each other (*nifampitsodrano*) and raised a stone to the west of the church, and the standing stone is still there to this day.

Parson: But his heart still isn't really free of it?

Armand: Absolutely not. That's why he can't go out into the sunlight—because, like, if there's a *famadihana*, he can't be taken out of the tomb. Absolutely not. He doesn't ever want to see the town of Betafo again.

A month later, Miadana told me the story about Norbert's ancestor who had been tied up and thrown in the pigsty. The reader will remember that the perpetrator was supposed to be one of the old grandees of *tampon-tanana,* and that the story was held out as the extreme form of injustice and oppression; a way of summing up in one image the degradation of slavery.[31] As usual, I mentioned the story to Armand the next time I saw him at the *hotely*, to see if he knew anything about it. But when I did, he immediately assumed I was talking, not about Norbert's ancestor, but Rainitamaina.

Armand: Because the story I've heard was that it was he who they tied up. That is: he was a *mpomasy*. Pork was taboo for him, garlic was taboo for him, and all that sort of thing; it was a *fady* he'd been cursed with. Not to be done. So they tied him up and put him in the pigsty.

Parson: So it was really he who . . .

Armand: He was the first one they put in there.

Rainitamaina just happened to be passing through. And they were really vicious. He was just a stranger at that point—though he did have his three sons with him. But the sons were outside, and it was they who had the medicine, and that's how he managed to get out—because its *hasina* wasn't spoiled.

It was after that he made his challenge: "May you not harvest rice for however many years . . ."

Parson: So, he came, and he had *fahaizana.* And the reason they tossed him in the pig sty was to kill its *hasina* . . .

Armand: Because you know, with Malagasy medicine: if it's together with pigs, it dies.

Parson: But still it had the power to destroy their rice?

Armand: Well, the rest of his medicine was clean because it was still outside. His sons were holding it. So he said: "For however many years, you won't harvest any rice." And he brought down the hail.

That's the real reason he didn't forgive the *andriana*, and still refuses to look on Betafo. He was still outraged at how they had waylaid him and cast him

amongst the pigs. Unlike most members of his lineage, Armand was consistently open about that ongoing bitterness. Parson, however, found it particularly difficult to understand. Hadn't the *andriana* conceded to him, he asked, even killed an ox in expiation?

> Armand: Well it wasn't he who asked for such a ceremony. They did, because they didn't have any rice.
> Parson: So he didn't really forgive them?
> Armand: He was *tied* up in there, thrown in with the pigshit! He was angry. That's the *real* history, not what Ratsizafy says about how there won't be any rain.

What lay behind his bitterness then was not just being a victim of aggression; there was also an issue of pollution. It was this same issue that had given Norbert's complaint its real punch.

In fact, this theme was an extremely powerful one, if one seldom voiced in public. White people often explicitly talked of slaves as being dirty. In the nineteenth century, for example, it was forbidden for slaves to enter sanctuaries like Ranoro's tomb because their presence was said to be polluting; it would disrupt the place's *hasina.* Even today, *andriana* have been known to engage in this sort of rhetoric behind closed doors. But among black people there is a kind of counter-rhetoric, one which is in its own way even more disguised, so much so that it took me quite a while to hear of it. Slaves, in fact, were people who had been polluted. Everyone has a certain *hasina*—an intrinsic capacity for action, a hidden grace—therefore, to keep someone as a slave, that power must be broken. The techniques were the same as one would use to destroy the power of an *ody:* the application of polluting substances, notably pigs, pork, pigshit, human excrement. Stories about men tied up and thrown in pigsties were complemented by darker rumors, usually only alluded to, of rituals of desecration where slaves would have urine thrown across their heads, or other practices too ugly to even speak about. But at least among the *mainty,* the very existence of these practices was also held to testify to an even greater secret: that of their own inherent superiority. If their masters had felt obliged to resort to such extreme forms of desecration, it was only because they knew they could never otherwise prevail. Most of those who spoke to me about such matters—often only secretly—phrased it in astrological terms: black people had a "stronger destiny" (*mahery andro*) than whites; in a fair fight, it's always the whites that are defeated. Many pointed to the way old *hova* or *andriana* communities would dissolve away as soon as *olona mainty* won a foothold.

Look at Betafo, Armand's mother once told me. When she first saw it thirty years ago, it was practically all white people; now, there's hardly one. Where most of Betafo's white people saw their decline as the fruit of an ancient guilt, most *mainty* believed it was inevitable. It was not the fact that they had made their slaves sleep amongst the pigs (as Ramanana suggested) which had lead to their defeat; they had only made their slaves sleep amongst the pigs because otherwise the slaves would have been capable of defeating them.

In Armand's final version of the story, Rainitamaina became the embodiment of that rarest of things: a legitimate, ongoing historical grudge. He too insisted his ancestor had never been a slave, but the story made Rainitamaina's experience at the hands of the *andriana* a figure for the degradation all slaves had endured; his anger and indignation was theirs as well. As such, he could still stand as champion of Betafo's *mainty* community, even if he was no longer really being represented as an ancestral figure. In Armand's narrative, the rhetoric of cursing and taboo tended to fade away entirely, or to be entirely subordinated to issues of power, purity, and grace. Such, perhaps, is exactly what one would expect from a life-long political activist.

In the next version I heard of the story, all this was taken even further.

Rainitamaina According to Rakoto

When I first met Rakoto I didn't know he was from Betafo. It was Parson who introduced us. Parson lived in Andranomadinika, the mainly *mainty* quarter of Arivonimamo; he introduced Rakoto to me when I was looking for information on astrology since Rakoto, he said, was the astrologer for most of Andranomadinika's inhabitants. Parson himself had hired him less than a year before to organize a circumcision for his son. Rakoto explained to me that the astrologer's craft was similar to school-learning, and told me all about his teacher's lectures and the endless notebooks a student would compile. It was only later I discovered Rakoto really lived in Morafeno, and that the teacher he was speaking of had been Ratsizafy.

Rakoto was Ratsizafy's great-nephew, the grandson of his elder sister, Razanapanahy. While he had apprenticed with Ratsizafy, and been considered almost like a son to him in years gone by, his later relationship with the Ingahibe had had its ups and downs. Some said Ratsizafy had been training him to be his successor, but that Rakoto had become impatient, refusing to wait for Ratsizafy's blessing and starting a practice of his own. Eventually,

Ratsizafy became annoyed with the young man and disowned him. Others suggested Ratsizafy's disenchantment was moral: he did not like his nephew's willingness to dabble in love medicine, or worse. For a long time, there was a definite rift between the two. By the time I knew them the two were temporarily reconciled, but the matter was by no means resolved.

Rakoto explained to me that by rights it was he who should inherit Ratsizafy's position when the old man died—not Pano, his eldest son. Razanapanahy, he pointed out, was Ratsizafy's older sister, and she had held the hail medicine until she died in 1961, when Rakoto was still an infant, Razanapanahy had adopted him. In fact, Rakoto now occupied the house in Morafeno in which she used to live. What, I asked, was likely to happen when the old man dies? After all, Ratsizafy was telling everyone that Pano was his successor. Well, Rakoto said, there'll be a contest of skill, most likely. We'll see which one of us comes out on top.

When I knew him Rakoto was in his forties, but everyone assumed he was much younger. He was a man who liked to make outrageous boasts—as I've mentioned, he was the only person I ever met who would openly declare that he knew how to use love medicine. Most people assumed that you couldn't take anything he said completely seriously, but that it was probably not complete bluster either.[32]

Just as his persona was based on flouting social conventions, his version of the Rainitamaina story seemed entirely unfettered by the normal restraints—particularly, the restraints of living in a mixed community. It's probably not insignificant that he prefaced the story by explaining that he would never have told it were we not in town. "In Morafeno, I don't say anything. I'm not the king there. There, Ratsizafy is the king." But in Arivonimamo, at least, he was happy to talk.

At any rate, it was shortly after that last conversation with Armand that Rakoto dropped by at Parson's apartment for a drink. I happened to be there at the time. So is it true, I ask, that you too are a descendant of Rainitamaina? Do you know the real story of his quarrel with the *andriana*? Because a lot of what I've heard, I said, is difficult to understand. What was the cause of it?

Well, originally he was just a wandering astrologer, said Rakoto. But the *andriana* attacked him and tried to make him a slave:

> Rakoto: They said: "There's a *mainty* coming here!"—even though he was just traveling around as *mpomasy* are wont to do, and happened to be passing through the district. They tried to seize him; he answered back; all the *andriana* and the

slaves that were with them came chasing after him: "Get him, boys!" . . . They seized Ingahibe Rainitamaina, and they tied his hands and feet. And threw him in the pigsty.

But once they'd tied him in the pigsty—he suddenly vanished.

"Where did he go?" they said. And then he spoke—from over there, way outside the pigsty: "Here I am! So what are you going to do about it?"

They said: "Get him boys, he's gotten away!" So they seized him again, and tied him up. And once they'd tied him up, they carried him back and put him in the pigsty and . . .

"Here I am!" he says.

They said: "He's skilled, he's really skilled!" [*tena mahay izany*] So "Piss on him—smear his head with shit, do it all!" they said. So they smeared him with filth, but he disappeared again.

And this is what he said: "You stay right there, Andrianamboninolona," he says. "You stay right where you are."

"So where do you come from, boy?"

He says: "I come from Betsileo."

"Betsileo are our slaves," the old man says.

"So if that's what you think, then you can try to enslave me. Me, I think I'm going home to Anosy" (because he'd made his compound over in Anosy).

So all the Andrianamboninolona came galloping after him to capture him, but he cast down lightning and blasted a giant ditch across the road. "That little slave is skilled, he's really skilled!"

And then he appeared again before them and he said: "You would even have enslaved me—so now, you'll have to let all the *mainty* go. If the black people who work for you aren't freed to a man . . ."

So they asked: "What kind of *fahaizana* do you have, boy?"

"This is my *fahaizana*," he said, "I'll send lightning and blast you all one by one into the valley." And then the lightning fell, and everyone whose skin was white, the lightning blasted them down, blasted them down, but everyone whose skin was black, it didn't touch them. "Keep it up!" they said, "and we'll win our freedom!"

But the *andriana* fought on—"What? So are we to be the slaves?" So he kept it up, faster and faster. Still it wasn't enough to make them give in—because they had lots of rice stored up, since they had all those slaves who were growing rice for them. So he said: "Come April, you won't have any rice," he said, "because I'll destroy it." So he sent down the lightning, and in one night it took all the rice out of the valley. After that they all came swarming to concede to him, they had no rice to eat so they conceded. And once they had conceded, Ingahibe Rainitamaina said: "Now let go of your slaves, send all the black people here to me I say, and let me be the ruler. Deliver Betafo to me," he said, "because if you don't give me Betafo I won't stop, but if you do give me Betafo, there'll be an end to your suffering."

So they delivered it.

And the white people took a flag and all went down to the valley of Anosy to present a bullock to him. And they delivered to him the authority: "All the authority is yours now, and it shall be yours forever." They delivered it to him and the authority was his: "Betafo belongs to Ingahibe Rainitamaina."

And that was the end of slavery. It was he who put an end to it.

The flag at the end seems to be an allusion to oral traditions about the end of slavery, which say the institution was only really suppressed in the wake of Menalamba revolt in 1896, when representatives of each community went out with white flags to surrender to the French.

I am tempted to call this the "desublimated version" of Rainitamaina's story. Where other versions were hedged with secrecy and inhibition, Rakoto seemed to be trying to smash through every convention to present a fantasy version of what the story might be like if the *andriana* and the entire historical tradition which maintained their place in a larger society were to be somehow blotted out. That Rainitamaina defeated the *andriana*, that he in some sense became the leader of the *mainty*, these are claims that everyone makes. But here they're taken to the point of manifest absurdity. In fact, even Rakoto would probably never have dared put it this way if there had been anyone else from Betafo in the room. It was the sort of thing one might hear from a marginal social character far from the public gaze, among friendly foreigners (Parson, I note, was born in Betsileo), everyone at least a little bit the worse for drink.

But Rakoto's self-indulgence is revealing in other ways. Note how, in order to produce such a fantasy of absolute victory, Rakoto has to snap the narrative away from all of the concrete, material objects and practices which give it its ongoing political meaning in Betafo itself. Gone are all references to tombs or mortuary ritual: the story of the body becoming heavy, the roundabout route, the taboo on letting the ancestor see Betafo. All these imply a continuing bitterness and opposition which would have been entirely gratuitous had Rainitamaina's victory really been so easy and complete. Gone too are any references to hail—which connect the ancestor's power to the hail medicine Ratsizafy still controls. Alone among all versions of the story, Rakoto—in his typical extravagant style—has his ancestor destroy the crops with lightning. This is not merely a melodramatic touch, I think. It is of much broader significance.

The Hail Charm

Ratsizafy was the most insistent about making Rainitamaina an ancestral figure, who imposed his intentions on the world mainly through cursing and imposing *fady*. As a result, he avoided the whole topic of medicine; while he dropped a hint when he admitted that the ancestor had destroyed his rival's crops with hail, he ensured the issue of the *ody havandra* lay concealed beneath the surface of his account. Augustin was a bit more forthcoming. He at

least described Andriamaharo and Rainitamaina as having a contest of *fahaizana,* of practical knowledge, and not ancestral grace—though by doing so, he was also forced to represent the whole controversy as frivolous. While he did not actually say that Rainitamaina used hail medicine to destroy his rivals crops, he did lay great emphasis on that fact that Rainitamaina's hail medicine continued to protect the region of Betafo: in fact, he said it was still Rainitamaina who "took care of" that medicine (*mikarakara azy*), implying that the ancestor's *hasina* lay behind it. In doing so he was doing something much like Ratsizafy, blurring the distinction between two sorts of power.

In Armand's narrative, though, these ambiguities are largely eliminated. His Rainitamaina is simply an expert at medicine. The *andriana* tried to destroy the power of his charm, but he managed to preserve it, and was thus able to destroy their crops and force them to concede.

Rakoto, of course, takes these themes even further, but he also drops all mention of the hail charm. This is why I was reluctant, even at the time, to see Rakoto's version as being the final word on Rainitamaina. There seemed to be at least two hidden themes in the official versions of the story: one centering on the hail medicine, the other, on pollution and slavery. Armand began to bring both out into the open, but Rakoto only took up the second one.

One reason the hail medicine was difficult to talk about was because it cast matters into a regional perspective. The hail medicine Rainitamaina created had a name: it was referred to as Dry Rock (Ravatomaina), which is also the name of a kind of stubby tree which grows here and there from the sides of the region's mountains, and whose wood forms the basis of the charm. But Ratsizafy is not the only man in this area north of Arivonimamo who has a hail charm called this. Between the rivers Onibe and Ombifotsy,[33] I found, just about every ancient, named hail charm is named either Ravatomaina ("Dry Rock") or Ravololona ("The Leafy One").[34]

Ratsizafy was aware of this, of course. He had an explanation. The Leafy One, he said, had been here first. Later, when their own ancestor arrived in this part of the country, he created Dry Rock and began distributing versions of the charm all around the territory. He established one, the mother charm, in Betafo. He brought another to a place called Bemanankasina, on the other side of the mountain.[35] When Rainitamaina tried to bring his *ody* into the Leafy One's home base of Ambatomivolana, however, there he was defeated: the *ody*'s power turned him back. The end result was a kind of hostile equilibrium, a balance of inimical forces that continued to the present day. When

storm clouds full of hail collect over the mountains, the Leafy One still tries to push them south onto Betafo; Dry Rock tries to push them north so that they ravage the fields of the Leafy One's clients in Ambatomivolana instead. Usually neither has the power to truly best the other, but the struggle is interminable.

In fact, the way Ratsizafy and his children told the story made it clear that these "hail charms" were more than simply hail charms; they were charms which would provide a kind of universal protection for entire social groups, which in the nineteenth century were referred to as *sampy.* And indeed, what Ratsizafy described did make perfect sense in terms of how such ancient *sampy* used to work: there was usually a "mother" *sampy*, often kept at the deme's political capital, and a series of "children," *vongon-tsampy,* "fragments," "connections," "offshoots" (different sources put it differently) which were considered minor versions of the same thing kept scattered across the territory under their protection.[36] So when I heard Ratsizafy and his sons talking about different versions of the Leafy One and Dry Rock, I was on familiar territory. I had been reading all about *sampy* in nineteenth-century sources. But it also made this a sensitive issue, because in twentieth-century Imerina, *sampy* had become a bad word. It was synonymous with "heathenism." Urban people called rural ones *sampy* worshippers when they wanted to demean them. No rural person would admit to being one; it would have been tantamount to denying one's Christianity. This was, almost certainly, the reason why everyone had been so reluctant to talk about this aspect of the story.

Noely

Actually, as time went on, it became difficult for me to talk to Ratsizafy at all. After the first few months he became suspicious, perhaps, too, a bit bored with me. At one point when I was asking about his curing, and getting a fairly detailed account from his oldest son Pano, Ratsizafy walked in and announced that, actually, he was a Christian faith healer, who divined his patients' conditions only by turning to random pages of the Bible. Then he exited, Pano a bit sheepishly in his train, leaving only his younger son Noely, a very quiet, intense-looking young man of seventeen, behind with Chantal and me. "Well . . . I guess that's the official line now,"[37] he said resignedly.

On the other hand, Noely didn't seem to mind talking, and he turned out to be an extremely good informant. We ended up talking for most of an hour:

DAVID: So how's the story go about . . . he Leafy One and Dry Rock fighting?
NOELY: Yes. They fought. He and Ingahibe Rainitamaina had an argument, and he Leafy One almost made Dry Rock transgress a taboo. They fought. Each man had their own *ody:* "So let's see whose is more powerful" they said.
DAVID: Transgressed a taboo? Which one?
NOELY: Pig. Rainitamaina had a pig taboo (though for we descendants that's not a problem any more).

But to this day, the two of them still don't get along. They're still in competition. Whenever there's about to be a hailstorm, it pushes off the hail.
CHANTAL: You mean it pushes it over here?
NOELY: And we push it over onto them—to show off. The two men's descendants still haven't come to terms with one another, so to this day, they're still fighting.
DAVID: So is that the real reason for the fight when Rainitamaina first arrived: the hail medicine?
NOELY: Yes, and each immediately set up their own. Each was showing off their *fahaizana.*
DAVID: And Andriamaharo . . . ?
NOELY: He was from Betafo. It was a contest between *andriana.* When Ingahibe Rainitamaina first came, Ingahibe Andriamaharo was annoyed and . . . it was like he wanted to show off his skill. Because he too had one, a kind of version of[38] the Leafy One, which he kept on a mountain in the west. And the two of them, who combined to work with the Leafy One, were among those who made war on Ingahibe Rainitamaina.

There followed the same story of the two men cursing one another's crops, the *andriana*'s surrender, the sacrifice of a white bullock, of Rainitamaina's body becoming heavy as it passed the village of Betafo so that it ultimately had to be carried the long way around . . .

It definitely felt like a breakthrough. The next morning I couldn't wait to take my new information to Armand. Why yes, he said. There had indeed been a hail charm in the village of Betafo itself. Actually, he said, the story was like this. Originally the Leafy One was not in either Betafo or Ambatomivolana, it was on a mountain called Marofihitra, located almost precisely between the two territories, part of an uninhabited mass of granite spotted with abandoned walls and fortifications. Originally, it protected the lands both to its north and to its south. Individual communities under its protection had subsidiary versions. Andriamaharo was in charge of the one in Betafo: it was kept at the foot of the very *amontana* tree which also protected the village from thieves and enemies.[39] When Rainitamaina showed up with his new medicine, then, Andriamaharo did not take kindly. Yes, that was why he had the man tied up and thrown in the pigsty. After Andriamaharo was defeated,

the Leafy One itself was pushed away, driven off its mountaintop, and ended up in Ambatomivolana, having lost effective control of the lands to its south.

At this point, almost six months after I had first visited to Betafo, I finally felt I had broken through to get at the real story. It might have been a bit naive, but it was certainly exhilarating. At last I understood why Ratsizafy had been so careful to cast the story on a regional stage, emphasizing the link between "Andriananandro" and "Andrianamboninolona." He was setting out the territorial field, an opposition between two territories, two sides of a mountain chain that continued to be locked in invisible warfare.

The story ended in an image of continuing balanced confrontation, with the Leafy One pushing the storm clouds south over the mountains, to dump their hail on Betafo, Dry Rock pushing the storm clouds north again. Usually neither had the power to completely penetrate the other's protections; the hail, I was told, tends to end up falling on the mountains, or on hapless farmers of other territories who lack an *ody* of their own. In fact, it is much the same kind of standoff as Ratsizafy described when he spoke of the two camps, each with their armed retainers, each behind walls, each unable to penetrate the other's citadel.[40] The forces were essentially inimical, but they had reached a point of balance, and there was no sign the situation was likely to change any time soon.

Speculation

Does any of this record the memory of real political events? There's no way to really know. Andriamaharo, as I've noted, was certainly an historical figure. In the 1840s, he was Betafo's most prominent man. Of Rainitamaina we can be less sure, but the documents that exist strongly imply that he did exist, that he was a slave, and that Andriamaharo owned him. If so, it would hardly be surprising if the two ended up in some notorious dispute. Slaves (particularly male slaves) were always getting into conflicts with their masters.

Actually, there's very little in the description of Rainitamaina that is historically impossible. In the nineteenth century there were slaves with multiple wives, who owned land, even who owned other slaves.[41] It is also easy to see how such success would have generated constant friction: here was Andriamaharo, a wealthy and prominent man, in the process of founding a prominent local lineage, here was the most wealthy and prominent of his slaves, engaged in a similar project of his own.[42] If both men were also trying to develop

a reputation for knowledge of medicine (as would-be lineage founders often do)[43] it could well have provided the pretext for a confrontation.

It could even be that the affair was much as oral traditions picture it. Could Rainitamaina have been earning his living as a wandering astrologer, providing copies of Dry Rock to clients in villages across the region north of Arivonimamo? There is no reason why he couldn't. Imerina at the time was full of wandering *mpomasy,* and especially as the century went on, and the practice of medicine was made officially illegal, it was especially slaves, freed slaves, and specialists from other parts of Madagascar who were likely to be involved in this sort of thing. If his own master had a hail charm of his own, one could well imagine it resulting in some act of brutal punishment. Perhaps Rainitamaina really was tied up and thrown in a pigsty. It's not impossible. But the whole story might just as easily be based on something that happened to one of Rainitamaina's grandchildren, or that never happened at all. What's significant today is simply the story.

The Weather as a Domain of Political Struggle

Ratsizafy kept Dry Rock in the northeast room of his great house, which was very much a local landmark. It was notable, in part, simply because it was painted white.[44]

Hence, Ratsizafy's house stood out.[45] It was the northernmost of three great houses that comprised Morafeno, lined up along the crest of a high ridge that dominated the surrounding countryside. Since, like all proper houses, its principal door faced west, it effectively looked down on Belanitra, the principle *andriana* settlement, a much larger jumble of about a dozen houses ranged along the opposite ridge.[46] What's more, Ratsizafy's house was, somehow, always visible, wherever one might go—and being so strikingly white and different was a hard thing to ignore. People in Belanitra and Anosy were constantly looking over their shoulders at it, particularly when Ratsizafy's name came up in conversation, checking to see if his shutters were open, to speculate as to his whereabouts. And they seemed acutely aware of the fact that at any time, he might be in there, staring back at them. I first noticed the pattern during a marriage *kabary* held at Belanitra, while I was talking with two soft-spoken young men leaning against the wall outside their father's house, when one of them casually glanced at the sky, as if trying to size up the possibility of rain, then took a furtive glance at Ratsizafy's house across the valley. The

other immediately glanced too, looked pensive for a second, then turned to me and asked, "So, do you have *mpomasy* in America?"

Dry Rock was kept in a small compartment over Ratsizafy's bed, against the northern wall in the upper north room, somewhat to its east. It was the most important element of the lineage's heritage, something their ancestor had created with his own hands. I never saw it myself—it was not something to display to strangers—but it was said to be in an ancient iron pot, made up of several chunks of graying wood with long porcelain beads pasted to them by years of anointment with fat, honey, and castor oil. There were only two occasions on which it was ever taken out. One was each year at the beginning of the lunar month of *Alakaosy*, when Dry Rock was brought before its maker's tomb and a sheep sacrificed. Otherwise it only left the house when there is an impending hailstorm.

According to Ratsizafy, when dangerous storm clouds build above Betafo, he first looks northeast to the tombs at Ambohitrimaninana. If Dry Rock is genuinely needed, a "ghost-fire" (*afon-dolo*) will spring up behind the tombs. Then astrological calculations must be quickly made, and the *ody* in its iron pot taken to the northern upstairs window—Dry Rock must never be taken through the door—cast down and carried to one of twelve astrologically-determined positions around the house. When its lid is opened, lightning flashes in the sky. After preparations with a tiny ax that accompanies the *ody*, Ratsizafy lights a small fire, and it's the smoke from this fire that drives any hail-bearing clouds away.[47]

Ratsizafy always went out of his way to emphasize the ongoing connection between ancestor and *ody*, to suggest the power of one lay behind the powers of the other. Nor was this power simply limited to dispelling storm-clouds: through it, Ratsizafy controls almost every aspect of Betafo's weather. Throughout rural Imerina, weather is a political issue, but Ratsizafy has taken this aspect of politics further than almost anyone.

Speaking broadly, people talk of two seasons: summer, the warm rainy agricultural season, and winter, which is cooler and very dry. If one is making fine distinctions, there are four:

Lohataona	(Spring)	late September through October
Fahavaratra	(Summer)	November to February
Fararano	(Autumn)	March and April
Ririnina	(Winter)	May through early September

Lohataona means "the head of the year," and marks the time when plant life begins to revive from the winter. Farmers begin to prepare their rice fields, mending irrigation canals and breaking up the huge clods of earth in which the soil has been lying fallow over the winter. In late spring, after there has been a little rain and springs and rivers begin to swell or reappear, rice is planted in carefully fertilized nurseries near the tops of valleys. *Fahavaratra* literally means "the time of lightning." By November and December everyone has begun plowing and harrowing their fields; usually in late December, they're able to start transplanting the seedlings in the nurseries into the larger rice fields, now flooded with several inches of water, their soil having been worked into a smooth pasty mud. This is the period of the hardest agricultural labor, and the most dangerous weather. People speak of the *volana antsaha,* the "month spent in the fields"; from morning to early afternoon there are usually ox carts parked at the edge of the drainage canals in every valley as men were working with shovels or driving yoked teams of oxen through ankle-deep water in some fields, teams of women arranging long cords across others, carrying down sheaths of seedlings and setting them in careful rows along the cords. It is stoop-work, and very exhausting, and rarely entirely over until by the end of December. After that the work gets lighter: it is a matter of weeding, keeping birds away, maintaining the water at the proper level, but still, people have to be down in the valleys every day.

With *Fararano* ("the end of the water") the growing season ends. Rains begin to peter out. Around Arivonimamo, rice is harvested in mid-April; for two or three weeks the valleys are full of men with sickles, bundled sheaths are "taken up" to threshing floors near the villages, threshed, and left to dry in the sun.

The terminology people used when they talked about the process of growing rice was in many ways strikingly similar to the terminology of pregnancy and childbirth. When the green stalks first form shoots in January they're said to be "pregnant" (*be vohaka*); when they sprout in February, to "give birth" (*miteraka*). As grains form, the plants are said to turn red, and then, finally, right before the harvest, yellow. By this time they are almost *masaka,* a word which means both "ripe" (when used of fruit) and "cooked": it refers to something brought to a soft edible state by the steady application of damp heat. The analogy is, of course, appropriate because summer is the hottest, dampest time of year, but here too is an implied analogy with human

gestation: pregnancy too is thought of as a form of generation characterized by damp heat, and to emphasize this, mothers and are kept confined for several days after giving birth with their newborn babies in a room that must be kept as hot and damp as possible, to allow a sense of continuity with the womb.

The analogy does not end with the harvest. In the country, no member of the family is allowed to eat the newly harvested rice until the family as a whole has observed a first-fruits ceremony (*misanta-bary*). Everyone assembles for a great meal, the rice is prepared with milk and honey, and the head of the family tastes it; only then does he give the blessing which releases it for the rest of the family to eat. In form, the meal is precisely modeled on the ceremony marking an infant child's first haircut[48]—in which clippings from the child's hair are mixed with milk and honey and fed to members of the family.

The end of the harvest is really the beginning of winter, *Ririnina,* ("desolation").[49] In winter, no rain falls. At best there are mists in the morning, occasionally accompanied by a fine misty drizzle, but otherwise most every day is the same: cold, windy, very dry. Springs and streams thin, wither, and then vanish; the rice fields lie drained and empty, except perhaps for cows grazing on the stubble and young boys watching them; the long grass covering the hills turns brittle and dully brown. Even for those who still busy themselves with gardening or off-season crops, work is more relaxed, and food is plentiful.

Winter is also the ritual season, the season for *famadhina* and circumcisions.[50] Since the tomb, as Maurice Bloch has much noted, is a very cold, dry place, there is a sense in which, in winter, the very earth becomes tomb-like: lifeless, cold, and still. Hence the tombs can be opened, and the dead come out, because there is no longer so much difference between inside and out. One astrologer told me that the reason for this was that when bodies are shifted from tomb to tomb, there are usually tiny bits of bone that get left behind; the cold winds were really invisible ghosts fetching the forgotten bits of their bodies to their new abodes. I don't think anyone else I knew had ever heard this—it seemed more a poetic conceit than anything else—but it nonetheless captured some of the sense of the season. And everyone pointed out that, if the stone of a royal tomb cracked open, or even if its door was left slightly ajar at the end of the ritual season, then rain would never fall anywhere near it until the matter was set straight. The entire world will remain as dry as the inside of the tomb.

From this perspective, the winter is a season in which the ancestors intermingle with living people. But from another, it is a season of release. It is in the summer that everyone is closest to their ancestral lands (their *tanindrazana*), most likely to be actually living in the proximity of their ancestors and ancestral tombs, and under the authority of their parents and their elders. In the winter, they scatter everywhere, looking for money. Already around harvest time dry weather is making the roads more passable; carts and trucks and motorcycles begin moving on all the dirt paths in the country, people start visiting relatives, buying and selling crops, hawking household goods to villagers who have been selling what they harvested. Markets swell. Animals are slaughtered. After the harvest everyone has money; they eat meat, sleep, drink rum, gamble, make love, make deals more than they do at any other time of year. It is a time, one might say, of individual realization, pleasure, and freedom from constraints. In Betafo, winter was the season when at any given time, most of the men and a fair number of the women were away from home; people are always showing up and disappearing; the only section of the population always around were the children, who (at least during the coldest months of July and August) were on vacation from school.

It is only appropriate then that *famadihana*, with their covert message of release from ancestral constraint and their indulgent feasts on fatty pork, should be held at this time of year.

During the winter, no one spends much time thinking about the weather. One day is much like any other. In the spring, it suddenly becomes the subject of endless conversation, because everything depends on when the first rains will come. Say there had been a few light showers on Monday, but then nothing for the rest of the week. On Saturday everyone would be pondering whether to go ahead and seed the nurseries regardless, or whether they should wait another week. If there still hadn't been any real rain by the time the seedlings were coming up, farmers would end up quarrelling over the distribution of irrigation water. Relations between neighbors, even within families, could become seriously frayed. If the rains were very late, suspicions would start to form: after all, while the vast majority of people were desperate for the rain, there were always a few with strong interests in seeing them delayed. Spring was also the season when everyone was hurrying to complete repairs on their walls and houses to fortify themselves against the coming weather, or to finish work on new buildings before the rain. Brick makers were working as fast as they could, piling up huge loads of freshly baked

bricks to be carted off at the last minute to construction sites. If the rains were late in coming, brick makers were obvious suspects, because one night's downpour could bring all their operations to an end. They were notorious for using medicine to hold back the season until their last orders for the season had been filled.

In 1989, the first spring I spent in Arivonimamo, the rains were slightly late; in 1990 they very late indeed. Each time, the situation gave rise to endless speculation. When even by the beginning of November 1990 there had only been a few weak showers, theories began to grow more elaborate and tinged with bitterness. Some people seemed certain they knew who was responsible. One day I met Rainibe on the road, and he pointed east toward Mount Ambohipanompo. Do you see those four tombs there on the peak, above that ridge with all the boulders? Those are royal tombs, he said, and one was the tomb of the man who had once kept the royal hail charm. Well, one of them was open. Someone had intentionally left the door ajar. He didn't know exactly who it was: perhaps it was a brick maker, or someone in the pay of one. His was a minority opinion. Most fingers pointed at the Leafy One. Any number of people remarked on how, late in the season though it was, there were several houses still under construction in the Leafy One's home town of Amberobe: their owners, it seemed, had paid off its keeper to postpone the summer rains. Some grew angry. In early November, while I was chatting with four or five young men from Amberobe outside the Protestant high school in Arivonimamo, a passing drunk actually started scolding them over the dry weather; they sheepishly denied responsibility, staring at their toes.

Ratsizafy himself was sick in bed at the time—this was after he'd broken his hip—so I never got his opinion on the matter. But he had been known to play such games as well. Ratsizafy himself told me he once had been building a house in town late in the season, and went to Rainitamaina's tomb to ask him to delay the rains:

> Ratsizafy: When I was building my house in Arivonimamo (because I have a house in Soanirano too, you know) I went there to beseech him. It was November when I started to build the house. "This guy's brain has turned backwards," one woman said. "You have forty thousand bricks piled up here and they're all going to dissolve! The rain's about to fall," she said, "and you're just starting the carpentry!"
>
> We had just held a *famadihana*, and I took some of the cloth that had been used to wrap Ingahibe Rainitamaina. I took it there and the carpenter said, "Don't be ridiculous." And the woman said, "This is November, and you're going to do carpentry? The rain's already beginning to fall!"

> I stuck it on a little reed placed to the southeast of the house. Just did it and didn't tell anyone. There in Arivonimamo, there was no rain—"We're hurrying," said the carpenters. But in Betafo, we had rain like anything. To the west they were suffering, but in Betafo, water everywhere. And in Arivonimamo the people were all saying, "Build your house quicker, man! Build quicker and get it over with!"

Boasting like this was almost unheard of; if Ratsizafy could engage in it, it was only because he had reached the point where his own powers were so thoroughly integrated with those of his ancestor that many people had trouble telling them apart. Ratsizafy also insisted that if Rainitamaina's body was ever exposed to the sun, the rains would be delayed: in such cases Ratsizafy would have to lead a delegation from Betafo carrying water to the tomb to beseech the ancestor to forgive them. As with the little piece of *famadihana* cloth Ratsizafy placed next to his house, it was the creation of a continuity between tomb and surrounding world that kept the world dry.

Ratsizafy was also widely rumored to be capable of making rain fall ahead of season—though this, he would openly admit. In late winter 1989—at the very end of the ritual season—some *andriana* from Anosy held a *famadhina*. Their plan was to first open the stone tomb that stands by the side of the road next to the village of Anosy itself, then, proceed to Betafo and open the southern tomb of the *Telo Milahatra.* Like most of the *andriana* of Anosy, they were not great friends of Ratsizafy. They hired his rival, Dada Leva, the old Betsileo astrologer from Kianja, to organize the ceremony. When he heard the tomb in Anosy was going to be opened, however, Ratsizafy immediately went down to the government office in Arivonimamo with an application requesting permission to carry out a *famadihana* on the same day: that was the tomb, he explained to everyone, that contained the body of Ramarozaka, the man who had fostered him, and he felt it was his duty to provide the ancestor with cloth.

The result was an unusual *famadihana*. Though Ratsizafy had tacitly coordinated with the *andriana*, the organization was formally separate; each contingent had their own flags, their own authorizations, their own astrologer. Ratsizafy's contingent set out from Morafeno at noon to meet the larger one, which had assembled in Anosy itself. At Anosy they jointly wrapped the dead; by 2 PM, the tomb was closed, the *andriana* continued north to Betafo, and Ratsizafy's party went back home. Almost as soon as Ratsizafy disappeared, everything started to go wrong. All day, the weather had been clear

and crisp; suddenly, clouds came out of nowhere. As they were crossing the moats to enter *tampon-tanana,* it suddenly started to rain. Several hundred people gathered, damp and irritable, outside the tomb, little knots clustering around anyone who had happened to have brought an umbrella, waiting for it to stop. Even when it did, nothing was as it ought to have been: the door took forever to open, irritated descendants started bickering, someone dancing danced on someone else's toes, a drunken quarrel escalated into fistfights, villagers squared off against urban visitors. The ritual was almost called off entirely before Armand and a few others stepped in as neutral intermediaries to negotiate a truce. Everyone I spoke to was of like mind about the matter: Ratsizafy was responsible. The moment he had gotten home, he had "adjusted destinies" (*manamboatra andro*) to bring the rain and generally sow dissension. Certainly Ratsizafy wasn't about the admit to this himself (he slyly intimated that it was all Dada Leva's fault, the man was incompetent) but it certainly did not subtract from his reputation.

Once the rains have started and *Fahavaratra* begins, the weather becomes in some ways more predictable. Mornings are damp and humid but the sky is always clear; by around four in the afternoon heavy clouds begin to build. The name of the season is altogether appropriate: whether or not it rains in the evening, there's always lightning. Random sheet flashes highlight the dark clouds; here and there on the horizon there are almost always maze-like outbursts of lighting bolts playing against some mountain or other corner of the sky. And rain might come at any time. Summer evenings are always starless, moonless—but broken by moments of sudden clarity; never quite silent, since there's always at least a low rumbling of distant clouds and almost everywhere, the constant, omnipresent sound of dripping water. If "eerieness" implies an ominous sense of calm, the kind shot through with the knowledge that arbitrary forces are at play, that at any time massive destructive forces might burst out, with terrible results, then they are definitely eerie. Also, dangerous. Lightning can kill. It can rip through thatched roofs, start fires, leave its victims blinded, deaf, disfigured. Downpours can bring several inches of rain in as little as an hour: in the face of such quantities of falling water, the very shape of the earth becomes mutable, eroded soil is prone to sudden twisting transformations; one can wake up in the morning and find deep fissures in a hillside where the day before there had been none, or discover that a grassy embankment above the road has simply dissolved, leaving masses of tree-roots dangling exposed above one's head, or cobblestones upended and

tossed about, swept into a pile at the foot of some steep hill. Hail is equally unpredictable. When it falls it is in sudden driving showers, often powerful enough to pummel small animals to death, sending humans frantically running for shelter, making a deafening racket on tin roofs, threatening to tear thatched ones to shreds. Hailstorms are notorious for their arbitrariness. Often, I was told, one sees fields where all the rice on one side of an embankment has been mangled, nothing but worthless, jagged stalks remain; on the other, it's untouched.[51]

With their suddenness, their randomness, their capacity for devastation, such aspects of weather became the paradigm for a certain kind of arbitrary power. There was a reason the God of folk-tales was always represented as casting lightning, that hail was referred to as "rocks from God." God, here, seems to represent the potential for destruction, the fear that like death itself, it might come, unexpectedly, at any time. But it is a potential for *future* destruction. Once lightning does strike—say a man wakes up to discover half his cattle have been blasted—talk of God is put aside. Instead, one seeks the human will that made it happen. It might turn out to be the work of an enemy using medicine, or ancestral punishment for having violated some taboo. It might be something entirely unknown: the ghost of a lost Sakalava who would soon appear in someone's dreams. But the cause could be discovered. Similarly, if hail broke through to ruin someone's rice, everyone would immediately begin to speculate about who was eating garlic or otherwise ignoring *fady*. Those keeping hail medicine in nearby districts would proudly report how theirs was left untouched; sometimes, the victims would counter by accusing them of witchcraft, of pushing the clouds onto them. The one constant was that these sudden bursts of destruction were deliberate; behind them was always a conscious intentionality.

Summer, then, has a double aspect. On the one hand, it is beautiful and lush. Often, when people looked down on a cultivated valley, they would remark how beautiful it was, all those well-tended fields thick with grain. They also remarked on how pleasant such fields were to walk through, bare feet on the muddy ridges that divided the paddy fields, occasionally dipping into cool water, neat rows of yellow rice with great white lilies emerging from the water everywhere between. It is a season full of fruit and flowers: there are peaches, *pibasy*, mangos, bananas, sugar cane, mandarin oranges, lemons, limes. But it is by no means a season of plenty. For many, indeed, it is a time of hunger, especially before the harvest when stockpiles of grain run out.

Only the wealthiest families still have rice during the last four months before harvest; most have to buy it, sparingly, for one meal a day at best; most meals consist of manioc.

If winter is a time of freedom from constraint, then, summer, for all its lushness, is one of discipline. It is after all a time when most everyone is on their ancestral lands, and working. Not only are most young people living next door to their elders, or under the same roof, they are under their immediate authority: since while the heads of local families may not be openly giving orders, especially in public, they are the ones coordinating, in their own understated fashion directing work. Even if one was free to, one couldn't travel far. In the summer, most roads become soupy mud. Even the course of one's day becomes much more tightly regimented. In winter, it's unusual at any time to see a large, comfortable bed with no one napping in it. In the summer people have to wake up early and finish their fieldwork by mid-afternoon, in order to be home before the rains start. During a large chunk of each day, dangerous weather keeps everyone penned indoors, exhausted, confined to little rooms crowded with other people.

Finally, this is the season of *fady*. I do not know of any taboo restricted to the winter, but there are a whole series that apply only to the time the rice is standing in the fields. The closest I ever got to a canonical list for Dry Rock's *fady* was this:

1. Not to grow garlic or onions, or bring them up into the village in the summer.
2. Not to cook *voanjo bory* (Cape peas) once the rice seedlings have been planted in their nurseries.
3. Not to split gourds open in the village (they have to be carried outside its limits and cut open there).
4. Not to spread out peanuts to dry while rice is still standing in the fields.[52]
5. Not to set out a threshing floor until the time comes (i.e., all the rice is harvested).
6. Not to set fire to bits of rice-chaff until the time comes.
7. Not to use rice shoots as flute until that time.

In addition, there are any number of minor rules, which—whether or not they are formally attributed to the *ody*—Ratsizafy does insist on as precautions against hail. Many focus on suppressing noise and tumult near the fields. In summer no one is allowed to break rocks, or to throw them, or to scream or whistle in the valley bottoms—even if it's to drive away birds feeding on the crops. Ox-cart drivers cannot crack their whips. Even if one wants to gather fruit, one mustn't shake the fruit tree, but has to pluck them one by one. All these rules become more strictly enforced as the season advances, especially once the rice has "given birth." The ostensible reason was that loud noises and falling objects attract hail—hail which does, in fact, fall heaviest just before the harvest. The sympathetic principle is clear enough. But the overall effect is to take that ominous stillness so typical of summer, and particularly of summer evenings—a silence thickened by the sense that it can be at any moment split by sudden overwhelming destruction—and make it a human creation, a discipline imposed by people in order to fend off that very (directed) destruction against which it was set.

On the other hand, the notion that one's own boisterous self-assertion can bring forth, as if an echo or answer, the violent self-assertion of ancestors or invisible powers evokes my analysis of *fady* in chapter 3: the fact that ancestors had been able to act, and still are, necessarily limits the degree to which the living can do the same. The link becomes even clearer when one notes how much taboos dwell on pleasures of the senses. Summer is when everyone is already at least a little short of food. Rice supplies are exhausted, or nearly so, meat is scarce and expensive, and on top of that, *voanjo bory,* one of the most popular alternatives to meat is disallowed, along with garlic and onions, so one is left with only ginger and hot peppers for flavoring. While nature is at its lushest, then, humans have to adopt an almost Spartan austerity, to constantly resist temptation. In this sense, the ancestors are very much present in the world of the living, far more than in the winter: they impose their will on the living, force them into smaller, constricted, disciplined spaces; and every evening, their potential for retribution is on unmistakable display, imminent in the flashing clouds.

Just as the power of Dry Rock allows Ratsizafy to define the beginning of the agricultural season by controlling the start of the rains, it also gives him the power to define its end. Under ideal circumstances, the rains should end shortly before the beginning of the harvest. If they continue much beyond it, it makes the rice difficult to thresh, impossible to dry. This is why taboos place

so much emphasis on the moment in which all the rice has been taken up from the fields and arranged on the tops of hillsides: it is only then that people can begin the process of making threshing floors. This is done by mixing dung and ashes with water until it becomes a sticky white paste, its consistency much like paint; people spill the mixture across a space of hard-packed ground—often one traditionally set apart for the purpose, with a dolmen-like structure made of stone—and then spread it with their hands, in effect whitewashing the earth. Rice is piled up in bales nearby it. By the time the grains are ready for drying in the sun—along with peanuts and other crops that have been postponed to this time—the weather must be clear and dry again.

Taboos which dictate that no one can begin laying out a threshing floor before the entire harvest is completed, therefore, have the effect of ensuring that everyone in Betafo (or at least, everyone under the protection of Dry Rock), black or white, has to follow Ratsizafy's lead. He ends up playing a role similar to the grandfather of a substantial local family: even though such a man might not be overtly directing his children and grandchildren in their work, they must always wait for his fields to be transplanted or harvested, before working on their own. It was yet another way to use the powers of medicine to create an image of ancestry.

Ancestors as Weapons

There were different versions of the Rainitamaina story. But in so far as Rainitamaina was more than just a story, in so far as he was a matter of tombs and medicine and ritual practices, it was Ratsizafy who was almost singlehandedly responsible for creating and maintaining him. Or so it had been for the last twenty years or so. One might say the ancestor had become, for him, a kind of vast, self-generating project: Rainitamaina's spirit assisted Ratsizafy's curing; the curing brought in money; money was invested in buying land in Betafo, in improving the ancestor's tomb, in conducting endless *famadihana*; doing so promulgated Rainitamaina's name, and brought further patients. It had reached the point where, by the time I was there, many people would treat the two—ancestor and astrologer—as practically the same.

The connection was made all the more powerful by Ratsizafy's habit of consistently ignoring any distinction between the power of ancestors and that of medicine; or at least, of the power of his own ancestor and that of Dry Rock.[53] Even the contest between two hail charms became a contest of *ozona,*

or cursing. Since *ozona,* the ability to impose taboos on one's descendants, is also the ultimate expression of ancestral authority, this makes what could only otherwise be represented as an egotistical contest of skill into a kind of struggle for seniority between *andriana*. Since the connection between ancestor and *ody* continues to the present day, the fact that many *andriana* continue to observe its taboos becomes proof of this same seniority.[54]

Ancestral memories, I have argued, are loaded with constraint and violence. But this violence is normally directed against descendants. Ratsizafy is extremely unusual in trying to fashion an ancestor into a weapon that could be used against someone else. As a result, Rainitamaina ended up looking rather like an *ody.* Just as the ingredients of *ody* are hidden away, so their very invisibility becomes part of what makes them powerful, so was Rainitamaina's body. Dry Rock was kept in an ancient pot whose lid is only lifted in order to drive away storm clouds; if Rainitamaina's body is, by some accident, revealed, he drives away the clouds so thoroughly that rain won't fall.

All of this was not entirely unprecedented, of course. I have already mentioned that ancient kings often have similar effects on the weather; rain will not fall if the tomb is open to the world. This is particularly the case of the most famous kings—spirits like Andriantsihanika, Andrianony, Lailoza, or the kings on top of Mount Ambohipanompo—whose tombs have become *doany,* places of pilgrimage, and who form a pantheon of spirits who assist mediumistic curers in their work.

Most of these were not originally "kings" at all; they were simply the ancestors of important demes who happen to have developed a wider reputation. Ratsizafy, it was clear, would have very much liked his own ancestor to join them. The usual mark of a *doany* was the presence of a sacred spring, and a place for taking sacred earth (*tany masina*); visitors could take both earth and water home for curing or protection. Ratsizafy had found a spring near his ancestor's tomb at Ambohitrimaninana and had the surrounding underbrush cleared away; he had also designated a spot for gathering earth, and during rituals on the first day of Alakaosy, he encouraged his followers to take earth and water as well. These rituals were, in fact, well attended. Ratsizafy had acquired a certain number of acolytes in nearby parts of Imerina and given them "extensions" of Dry Rock, and all were required to attend, to jointly give *hasina* to the mother *ody*. He also had them gather sacred earth to sprinkle on the fields to be protected by Rainitamaina's medicine. But he insisted the earth had a

power of its own; Noely in particular touted it, saying that its presence, in their house, protected them from witchcraft, and made it impossible for anyone living in Morafeno to work evil.

I mention this aspect of Rainitamaina last because it was not really altogether developed. The *fanasinana* was still largely directed at the *ody*, not the ancestor. Clearly, Ratsizafy would have been delighted to see Rainitamaina join the pantheon of ancient kings, to begin to possess curers other than himself and his immediate followers. But at least when I was there, this had definitely not happened. I never heard of any pilgrims coming to Ambohitrimaninana who had not been brought there by Ratsizafy himself; I never heard of any mediums who had been possessed by Rainitamaina who were not also his descendants.[55] So far, this marked one of the limits of Ratsizafy's success, the point where his project hit its head against a larger world in which he was not nearly so influential.

Unfinished *Doany*

I will return to this point in a moment. What I want to make clear first, though, is that such incomplete projects are not entirely uncommon. I've already remarked on how certain people—particularly astrologers—tend to identify their own powers with those of an ancestor. One could, perhaps, see this as a path which, if taken to its logical conclusion, would lead to one's tomb becoming a *doany* and one's ancestor joining the national pantheon of curing spirits. Of course, only very rarely do things actually go this far. But it may well be that starting on this path is what opens up the possibility to directing an ancestor's violence outward, to make them weapons in the covert struggles for dominance which seem so typical of places like Betafo.

This is especially important to understand if we want to gauge the real limits to Ratsizafy's power, the reasons for his apparently deeply internalized sense of constraint.

First of all, a lot of Betafo's *andriana* felt their own ancestor's tomb should properly be a center of pilgrimage. Opinions differed as to why this had not yet happened. Irina, for example, said it was not for lack of *hasina*; it was just that he was too mean. Most curing spirits, she observed, give you some kind of warning if you do something they don't like—you're injured, you suddenly collapse. But Andrianambololona, "he doesn't think about it

first, he just goes right out and kills you." So people are afraid to go to him. Ramanana, originally from Betafo but now living in Arivonimamo, blamed his descendants. Actually, she explained, the *razambe* of Betafo was a close relative of Lalaiza, the king whose *doany* was on top of Mount Ambohitrambo (the one who walked on ropes of silk, she explained, "though I don't know if they were brothers or father and son or what"). The only reason he doesn't have a proper *doany* she said was that a real *doany* has to have a sacred spring. Andrianambololona does have one, but his descendants have forgotten where it is, and no one cares to search for it. Just one more symptom, she sighed, of the degeneracy of the present day.

After this conversation I started asking everyone if they had ever heard of such a spring. Most claimed ignorance. Others noted that there were several springs in the valley to the east of *tampon-tanana;* most valleys were full of little springs, which often bubbled up in the middle of rice fields. Sometimes one would mysteriously dry up or reappear. Some were willing to speculate there might be a spring connected with the ancestor—there usually is, with such a powerful one, but weren't certain as to where. The most interesting response came from Rainibe. I ran into him one Saturday in front of the general store in Arivonimamo, where he had been chatting with a handful of young men, including two *andriana* from Belanitra. I mentioned my conversation with Ramanana. Oh yes, Rainibe said. She must have been referring to the spring in a rice-field to the immediate east of *tampon-tanana*. It's largely underground. There is, indeed, a snake-like creature that lives in it, an avatar of the *razambe,* though it only rarely shows itself . . .

One of the young men nodded in recognition: not that he'd heard this particular story, but he was familiar with the sort. "And one isn't allowed to kill it, I suppose?"

"Well, *I* certainly wouldn't kill it," replied Rainibe, bemusedly. "It's not *my* ancestor. I suppose you could go kill it if you liked."

One thing everyone did agree about Andrianambololona though was that his was a tomb particularly susceptible to pollution. When a *famadihana* was held there, for example, it was forbidden to serve pork during the subsequent festivities; the organizers had to slaughter oxen instead of pigs. Most of all, the tomb was not to be touched by the descendants of slaves. Miadana's mother-in-law Elizabeth told me how once during the '60s, when she was staying over in her house on *tampon-tanana,* she heard a strange noise coming from the tomb.

> Elizabeth: My house-servant was there with me at the time—it was early evening—and that tomb started crying. It was going "godao . . . aoao . . . ao . . . ao" [a low quavering groan].
>
> "Rakoto Ramaro?"
>
> "What is it?"
>
> "It sounded like a gun went off. What was that, what was it?"
>
> And there it was again: "gadaoao . . . aoao . . ." Three times.
>
> The next day, or the one after that, I went to my brother [Rakotonarivo Auguste's] house, in that big compound there, and I told him "there was a low echoing sound inside the tomb."
>
> "Oh, didn't you know?" he said. "Someone was sullying the tomb [*manitsaka*]. A black person was sitting there."

Others claimed that guns literally did go off inside the tomb whenever a descendant of slaves touched it—presumably, and rather ironically, these would be the rifles of Andrianambololona's "soldiers," who were themselves his slaves. (One man even told me there was a cannon buried there.) This rhetoric of pollution kept cropping up: when Andrianambololona possessed one his descendants (as he did, when he wanted a *famadihana*), for example, he always complained about being surrounding by so many dirty slaves.

The Opposition of Spaces

Now, Ratsizafy clearly took these stories very seriously. In fact, since he finally came into possession of his *ody*, Ratsizafy had never so much as set foot on *tampon-tanana.* He refused to. This is what everyone told me, anyway. When he walked to Andrianony, he would always take the low road to the west; when he had some business with an inhabitant of *tampon-tanana,* he would call out from the lip of the moat or send someone to fetch them. Elizabeth recalled how he once had a heated argument with her servant, Rakoto Ramaro, which ended in the latter fleeing to *tampon-tanana,* leaving Ratsizafy stuck at the edge of the moat, fuming and shouting imprecations and calling him a coward. Why? Most *andriana* politely refused to speculate. They seemed to feel such behavior spoke for itself. But Jean Marie—who also claimed descent from Rainitamaina—admitted to me that, yes, it was all because Ratsizafy was intimidated by Andrianambololona. The "thing he holds"—his ancestor, and his ancestral medicine—may have great *hasina,* but it is ultimately not quite so great as the *andriana*'s; besides, the two are profoundly inimical.

In the end, even Ratsizafy didn't really believe his ancestor was superior.

If so, this would definitely help explain some otherwise peculiar use of terms, even in his stories. Notably, when he was describing the way his ancestor's corpse suddenly became heavy, when its bearers were about to "pass over" the center of Betafo. He says: "They had been about to trod on Andriamaharo's compound." The word I translated "trod" here is *manitsaka,* which also means "trample" or "pollute."[56] It is the term that's always used for someone who violates a taboo by carrying, say, pork into a sacred precinct, by refusing to take off one's shoes before entering one, or (in the last century) entering at all if one was a slave. To say "he did not wish to *manitsaka* the lands of Andriamaharo," then, is not saying he despised the place, or even that it brought back unpleasant memories. If one were trying to say that, one would have used a different word. It is saying he did not wish to sully it with his presence; that he felt entering it would be a mark of disrespect; in effect, it is saying the *andriana* view that *mainty* are unclean and polluting is not altogether incorrect.[57]

Here again, perhaps, we end up with Ratsizafy's familiar theme of balanced confrontation. At least, the story ends on a note of balance. First, Rainitamaina demands to be placed always to the north of the *andriana*. Then, when they are taking him to the north, they find themselves unable to carry him through the center, and have to wend a circuitous path along the eastern rim of Betafo's territory, through Morafeno and then below the peak of Ambohidraidimby. In doing so, they are in effect drawing a line that defines the eastern and northeastern borders of Betafo's territory. They very literally exile themselves to the margins.

What I am suggesting is that the division of space in Betafo can be seen from two very different points of view. Call them the vertical and the concentric. From the first, Ratsizafy's ancestor was clearly superior. Higher ranking things should always be placed to the north and to the east: Rainitamaina's tomb is to the north and east of all *andriana* tombs. It is also physically higher than the oldest of them, clustered as they are in the wooded area inside the central moats. Even Ratsizafy's house is above and to the east of all *andriana* settlements.[58] Just as kings survey their realms from the mountaintops, Ratsizafy peers down on the *andriana* from the direction of seniority.

From the other point of view, however, Betafo is the center, and all other tombs and houses mere offshoots and appendages. The series of concentric circles marked by the three layers of moats continues outward, with each place becoming more marginal, more recent, less *masina* as it grows farther from Andrianambololona's tomb. From this perspective, Ratsizafy and his

ancestor have indeed been exiled to the margins. Their inability to enter the center of Betafo was only the most dramatic manifestation of this exile; the custom of circling around the borders of the territory each time one of the lineage died also served as continual reminder. Even the custom of never letting Rainitamaina catch sight of Betafo could take on a very different color. To be able to gaze down on something is, after all, one of the simplest expressions of authority. Where Ratsizafy couldn't enter *tampon-tanana*, Rainitamaina couldn't even look at it.

In fact, there was one other story about the origins of Rainitamaina: one not taken very seriously by most, but which purported to explain this situation. It was put forth to me by Dada Leva, the old Betsileo astrologer from a nearby village, who had long ago married a woman from Betafo, of Andrianamboninolona descent. Dada Leva was the astrologer who normally organized *famadihana* on *tampon-tanana;* he was also the one on whom Ratsizafy is said to have dumped rain. The two had long been rivals. Dada Leva's assured me that the whole story of Rainitamaina's dramatic confrontation with the *andriana* was so much nonsense. It never happened. The man was just a thief. Rainitamaina, you see, had been a slave on *tampon-tanana.* He kept getting caught pilfering the nobles' houses, until finally he was sentenced never to set foot there again. Such is the power of the *andriana* ancestor, he implied, that the sentence has become like a curse that his successor Ratsizafy has been forced to respect even to the present day.

The Individual and Society

At this point the reader has the means to gauge for herself some of the enormous political significance Ratsizafy had for the community of Betafo. It went beyond his wealth and reputation, beyond, even, the fact that everyone felt he had the power to do damage to them by invisible means. If political action is action meant to influence others by being reported or represented to them afterward, Ratsizafy was by far Betafo's most significant political actor. He was a constant topic of speculation and opinion; his doings, comings and goings were endlessly reported and retold. One's opinion of Ratsizafy was the surest barometer of one's larger political allegiances. Just about all *mainty* spoke of him with reverence—or at the very least, respect. So did those *andriana* who were his clients. Most *andriana* reacted to his name with anything from guarded suspicion to hostility. "Ratsizafy's going to be officiating at the

next *famadihana* here in Betafo?" asked Miadana, when I told her the news. "Great. There'll be a riot." Then she went on to describe in detail what had happened the year before, when Ratsizafy sent the rain.

A large part of his significance turned on the control of space. He constantly surveyed Betafo, and at any time, people seemed keenly aware of the possibility that he might be doing so. As an astrologer, he had also been responsible for deciding on the positioning of many of Betafo's houses and tombs, calculating the play of forces and destinies created by their relation to one another, conducting rituals to protect their inhabitants from malign destinies, ghosts, and dangerous intentions. But it was precisely in his ability to dominate space that he encountered his most dramatic limitations. *Tampon-tanana* lay outside his gaze, he had no say in its construction, he did not even dare to set foot there.

One of the real puzzles of this chapter is why a man so powerful should have felt so endlessly hemmed in by invisible limitations. He had a constant tendency to evoke unseen rivals of power equal or greater to his own, then live in fear of them. It is very difficult to see how refusing to enter *tampon-tanana,* for instance, could be part of some intentional strategy; neither was there any recognizable precedent for such behavior (anyway, no one I knew could really think of anyone else who had ever acted so). He seemed genuinely intimidated.

We are dealing, then, with a figure of monumental political significance, who was also a notorious eccentric. Ratsizafy's sense of limitation is one of those points where culture, history, and personality are so intricately woven that they become impossible to separate. Perhaps one shouldn't even try. The best way to proceed in this case, I think, is to first try to find a pattern in Ratsizafy's eccentricities, then, see if one can make sense of them as a refraction of his own life history.[59] I'll start with his most obviously eccentric habit: of drunkenly chasing the cat, the strange violence its presence apparently invoked in him. This urge seemed to be directly connected with the cat's own capacity for violence. He had got the animal to kill mice, then hated it for doing so. Whenever he saw it on the prowl, he would almost compulsively draw back and snarl in what seemed to be an imitation of a cat's hiss, drawing back his hand as if to strike . . .

Elias Canetti (1960:281–83) once used the example of a cat playing with a mouse to make a distinction between "force," sheer physical destructiveness, and what he defines as "power":

> The cat uses force to catch the mouse, to seize it, hold it in its claws and ultimately kill it. But while it is playing with it another factor is present. It lets it go, allows it to run about a little and even turn its back; and, during this time, the mouse is no longer subjected to force. But it is still within the power of the cat and can be caught again. If it gets right away it escapes from the cat's sphere of power; but, up to the point at which it can no longer be reached, it is still within it. The space which the cat dominates, the moments of hope it allows the mouse, while continuing however to watch it closely all the time and never relaxing its interest and intention to destroy it—all this together, space, hope, watchfulness and destructive intent, can be called the actual body of power, or, more simply, power itself. (Ibid.:281)

The cat allows an illusion of freedom, but all the time reserving the capacity for a swift sudden blow that would totally annihilate its object. The power of the state rests on just this kind of control of space—continual watchfulness, combined with the occasional, precise application of destructive force. This much is commonplace (anyway, I said much the same in chapter 1). But Canetti takes it in an interesting direction. When kings and governments choose emblems to represent their power, they tend to emphasize not so much the control of space as the capacity to annihilate it. They do not just fix on animals that kill. They tend to fix on those that descend suddenly and unexpectedly on their prey: great cats like lions and tigers that pounce, birds like hawks and eagles that descend like lightning, or even, in many cases, lightning itself. Lightning, he notes, is in its own way the ultimate symbol of this sort of power because it can strike anywhere, utterly unpredictably, and so swiftly that flight is inconceivable.[60] A point which opens on another of Ratsizafy's eccentricities, what many said to be his greatest fear. For all his vaunted power over weather, Ratsizafy was, by all accounts, terrified of lightning. Neighbors told me he would often grumble that he lived in constant danger; the Leafy One was always throwing storms at him; at any unguarded moment, it might unleash a bolt that could slip through his protections and destroy him.

There seems to be something of a constellation of images and associations here. Lightning, the special attribute of a violent, arbitrary God, was Ratsizafy's greatest fear; cats, whose existence he liked to cite as proof of the arbitrary malevolence of God, his most bizarre antipathy, which egged him on to petty, self-destructive acts of violence. It was a constellation that centered on defenselessness and vulnerability before unreasonable powers: swift blows descending unexpectedly from above, lightning, a cat's paw, Ratsizafy's foot . . .

It also implied a very dark view of the cosmos. When speaking of God

(*Andriamanitra*) almost everyone I knew would adopt the Christian idiom: God was assumed to be benevolent and just. Ratsizafy and his sons were among the only ones who propagated the "Malagasy" view of God as morally ambivalent. In fact, their position was not exactly traditional; it was more what one might call traditionalist: a self-conscious rejection of Christian doctrine. In its pre-Christian sense, *Andrianamanitra* was anything beyond accounting, whether things of unprecedented wonder (i.e., silk, when it was first introduced to Madagascar) or unaccountable misfortunes (Why do humans have to die? Because of God.). Lightning, hail, and other unpredictable yet catastrophic effects of weather were his most tangible manifestations. This lack of accountability placed God outside all possible moral judgment: God was not a moral person, in the sense that his actions could not be considered right or wrong (is it wrong that humans have to die?) This principle lingers on, implicit behind any number of common figures of speech: for example, the distinction between diseases caused by witchcraft and "diseases caused by God" (*aretin-janahary*)—that is, ones for which no one could be held responsible.

Cats on the other hand were, like owls, a symbol of evil; they were the constant familiars of witches. This was true both of housecats (in town, old women excessively attached to their cats were prime suspects) and feral cats, or *kary*, considered loathsome creatures who raided people's chickens, and assisted witches in their nocturnal errands. Witchcraft was in no sense a force inhering in the cosmos. It represented very human idea of evil—indeed, it was really only between human beings that moral judgments could be made.[61]

By rejecting the Christian doctrine of God's benevolence, and then hammering it in by insisting it was God who had made cats, Ratsizafy seemed to be coming as close as one could to saying evil really did inhere in the nature of the cosmos, and that God was ultimately to blame. It was, as I say, an explicitly anti-Christian view,[62] and it appeared on other levels of Ratsizafy's cosmological thought. For example, where most mediums tended to make a great show of Christian piety, and referred to their spirits as *fanahy masina*—the same term used in the Malagasy Bible for the Holy Spirit—Ratsizafy argued that the chief of them, the four kings who used to rule over the four quarters of Madagascar, had been nothing but witches when they were still alive. It was a view that would have been profoundly shocking and offensive to the vast majority of mediums, who treated these kings as paragons of moral good.[63]

But it echoed his feeling that the highest powers were, always, profoundly corrupt.

Ratsizafy then had a sense of being within a space controlled by powers blind to any principle of justice, starting with God himself. What was its origin? Here it is hard to avoid thinking of the fact that, by his own accounts at least, Ratsizafy had spent the earliest years of his life under just such an arbitrary rain of blows. His mother then had total authority over him. His main way of representing his mother, in fact, was as a woman capable of landing punches—she could even send boxers sprawling—and he rarely missed a chance to stress her arbitrary violence toward her children. In this she was unusual. Most Merina parents rarely strike their children (though I had the impression *mainty* parents were more likely to). Most single mothers also provided some sort of *mpitaiza* for their children, some male relative(s) to "foster" them. Ravao provided none. And afterward, the feeling of being subjected to harsh and unjust female power must have been magnified endlessly by his prolonged tutelage to women in adult life.

When he talked about the man who fostered him, Ratsizafy spoke not of his own kin, but of his old *andriana* employer from Anosy, a man whose ancestors used to own his family. He is the first of a series of male ancestral figures that fill his reminiscences: the two old men from Anosy who first taught him astrology, his tutor in Mount Antongana, and especially, old Rainitamaina himself—almost all of whom he refers to as *andriana*.[64]

A contrast seems to emerge: between unjust female power (for which the most potent image is the witch) and legitimate male power, based on knowledge, *fahaizana.* Almost all of Ratsizafy's male ancestral figures were men of knowledge, and we have seen at length how he tried to blur any distinction between *fahaizana* and ancestral authority.

One could go even further. The issue of slavery is of course repressed in Ratsizafy's reminiscences, since Ratsizafy insists his ancestors weren't slaves. But in so far as the diffuse experience of violence, indignities, and infantilization that was a part of its heritage appears at all, it becomes concentrated in the figure of his mother, Ravao—a woman who was born a slave, and spent at least half her life as one—and more broadly, the very notion of unjust female authority. In effect, reaching full maturity became a matter of making a clean break with the world of old black women and identifying himself entirely with that of knowledgeable white men. What I am saying is that ultimately, it

was the opinions of the modern-day equivalents of men like Ramarozaka and those other ancient *andriana* whose company he used to keep in Anosy and who introduced him to his calling that was most important to him; for them to accept him as a fellow *andriana* was the ultimate measure of his own maturity.

This at least would explain the way that Ratsizafy never talked about the violence and indignities his Rainitamaina suffered at the hands of the *andriana*, or his ancestor's resulting bitterness.[65] It was not that Ratsizafy didn't acknowledge his ancestor had been thrown in the pigsty: his own son Noely later confirmed everything Armand had told me. It was just that this wasn't the aspect of the story he preferred to stress. He didn't really want Rainitamaina to be an icon of resentment (that was something he clearly inherited); he would have much preferred him to be a figure the *andriana* could accept as an equal—if nothing else, an equal in rivalry. But even when he became head of the family, he could hardly eliminate those aspects of his ancestor's history entirely: it was that very bitterness toward the *andriana*, after all, that guaranteed Ratsizafy's own position as effective leader of Betafo's *mainty*.

In other words, his ultimate goals were in near-total contradiction with the means at his disposal. To get Betafo's *andriana* to accept him as an equal on the basis of such a history and position was a nearly hopeless proposition. His dilemma might, perhaps, be summed up by his behavior when Razanatonga Elizabeth first returned to Betafo in the 1960s: he came to greet her on the path near Anosy, eagerly welcoming her back and explaining how he was an old friend of the family, then discretely turning back, unable to accompany her to her house on *tampon-tanana*.

Of course, none of this explains *why* Ratsizafy refused to set foot on *tampon-tanana*—why he seemed genuinely afraid of the invisible power of its ancestor, and despite all his pretensions, half-inclined to accept the premise that his own presence would dirty it. To understand this, I think, one has to move beyond personal history to look at the historical process by how such invisible power was constructed.

Most forms of *hasina* were recognized to be constructed; the *hasina* of ancestors, in fact, being perhaps the only kind that was not. It was also the most limited in scope, since it basically took the form of constraints and restrictions, backed up by the threat of punishment. However, it was also considered the most morally legitimate variety, mainly because it was directed at maintaining the integrity and solidarity of a group of descendants—even if

that also meant excluding others. Other forms of *hasina* had to be created, and this demanded not only knowledge, but also a certain notion of persuasiveness. It is no coincidence that *hasina* could also mean "words that are persuasive," because the process of creating it always involved words, words which attained a power to affect others beyond the immediate presence of the speaker, owing to the achievement of some kind of social consensus. In theory at least, even the coercive properties of medicine, their ability to harm or intimidate others, were recognized to be premised on some such tacit consensus. If you did not believe, it would not hurt you. While this might not have been entirely born out in practice, all those delicate games of intimidation documented in chapter 7 rested on a kindred logic.

Much of Betafo's politics, I argued, was a matter of circulating impressions in such a way as to create at least the strong suspicion in other people's minds that one might be able to do them harm. In a way, the effect was to create something that operated in much the same way as legitimate, ancestral authority, since the aim was to constrain others from acting, or speaking, in certain ways, and the means was an implied threat of retribution. But political power, I have also argued, is not simply the capacity to play a game but the capacity to control or regulate it; not just a matter of preventing others from interfering with one's own projects of action but to prevent them from being able to introduce their own versions of the story, or acting in such a way as to generate the stories they wish to circulate. There was a time when royal authorities tried to do this, but in Betafo, when I knew it, it was not clear if this sort of power was invested in individuals at all.

To a certain extent, Ratsizafy did have it. At least within the confines of Betafo, he had a lot of people intimidated. When it came to infractions against *fady*, his eyes really were everywhere, as Miadana discovered when her new neighbors began scouring around her gardens for garlic, or threatening to tell Ratsizafy every time she washed her pots in a stream. She and Claude might deny that the power to enforce these taboos was really derived from ancestors, but they never denied it existed. Clearly Ratsizafy and his cohorts did have the capacity to punish those who openly flaunted his rules through invisible means. And the fear such knowledge created definitely did extend to the way people reacted to his version of Betafo's history. Take the *trano manara* he had built on the top of his tomb, a mark of *andriana* status which not even the Andrianamboninolona of Betafo were traditionally entitled to. Building it was as close as one could get to a direct slap in the face to Betafo's

andriana, but not a single one I spoke to would spontaneously denounce the thing. Instead, they simply pretended it did not exist. It was only when I asked that I discovered they were well aware of its significance, though even then, I would usually get back little more than helpless, beleaguered shrugs. Neither were many *andriana* willing to openly take issue with Ratsizafy's version of Betafo's history—at least, in front of me. Some, like Irina, might trivialize the matter (it was probably just some stupid squabble between neighbors) but very few were willing to discount the story entirely, let alone make the obvious suggestion that it might have had something to do with the fact that Rainitamaina was a slave. Those who did were either, like Dada Leva, rival *mpomasy*, or they lived outside the community, far from the area under Ratsizafy's eyes.

There might have been nothing exactly corresponding to a public forum, but there were certainly contexts in which the things one said and did were likely to be repeated widely to others, and others in which they were not. My impression was that it was mainly fear of word getting back to Ratsizafy that stopped people from contradicting him, because apart from a certain core of devoted followers, most *andriana* did not take his claims to status seriously. One must bear in mind that most of Betafo's remaining *andriana* were poor and powerless; their status was about the only thing they had on him. *Tampon-tanana*, its moats and the famous ancestor, was the ultimate proof of this. What was more, that status was supported by a history which was—unlike Ratsizafy's power—not limited to the immediate confines of Betafo. This was the real reason, I think, Ratsizafy found the place so intimidating. *Tampon-tanana* was not only the origin of Betafo's history, but the point where that history opened up to a larger world, and other forms of *fahaizana* typical of that larger world over which Ratsizafy had no influence whatever.

The memory of ancestors, I have said, is experienced largely as a form of violence. For the memory of the ancestors of *tampon-tanana* Betafo this was doubly true, because they were also preserved through techniques of memory that were entirely implicated in techniques of coercion. The ghosts which haunted *tampon-tanana,* the images and associations which clustered around the figure of its *razambe*, were first and foremost of officers and bureaucrats, men in military uniforms and three-piece suits, men skilled in the use of ledger books and writing of reports, accustomed to giving orders backed up with the threat of military force. It is important to remember that Ratsizafy not only grew up under a violent mother, but also, under an efficient police

state itself very much founded on the precise application of violence, and seen, by ordinary Malagasy, as no more morally accountable than cats. Ratsizafy was one of the few people still alive who could remember what men like Andriantonga, Ralaimanarivo, and Rabe Leon had looked like—and would remark wonderingly to me about their incredible *fahaizana,* their command of written language which was also a command of history. Even now, the inscription on the tomb, dated 2 October 1713, served as a reminder of the latter. And, of course, periodically their present-day descendants would appear in their silk, umbrellas, and gold jewelry, as they did during Rahoby's funeral, to observe another body being placed in one of Betafo's tombs—people so oblivious to Ratsizafy's pretensions that afterward, Rahoby's widow could casually remark to me that while she didn't really know the details of her family history, I could always ask Ratsizafy, since after all, she said, he was *andevondrazananay*, "one of our ancestors' slaves."

What is it, anyway, that guarantees *andriana* status? In earlier times, it was the power of the state. If anyone of Ratsizafy's status had gone out and built himself a tomb with a *trano manara* a hundred years ago, armed men would have eventually intervened. It would have been torn down. In the twentieth century, it was no longer guns but the authority of books and papers preserved in the libraries, archives, and universities of the city, along with that of scholars and teachers familiar with them—but as I have endlessly pointed out, the two were not considered to be so very different. Ratsizafy might have remarked wonderingly about Ralaimanarivo and Rabe Leon's *fahaizana,* but he used the same language to describe that of the French officers and engineers who, in the 1930s, had dragooned him and thousands of other young Malagasy men into forced labor, cutting their way through the mountains and forests of Tamatave on the east coast to lay the tracks for their railroad, and the thousands who had lost their lives as a result. The power to intimidate others which his own skills brought him was nothing compared with that of the efficient, bureaucratic administration of force at the disposal of such men—and with which, by now, the very meaning of words like *andriana* had become largely identified.

In trying to blur the distinction between the power of ancestors and that of medicine, Ratsizafy sought to translate knowledge into status, his mastery of techniques to which old *andriana* men had first introduced him into the status of actually being one. He had achieved some limited success. But in a way the entire project was only possible because the most powerful forms of knowledge

and intimidation had been temporarily pushed off the scene. Those administering them no longer considered what happened in Betafo sufficiently important. The ultimate lock on his ambitions was the fact that, in the capital and its surrounding villas, descendants of *tampon-tanana* still existed, armed with an altogether more efficient means of making history.

IT MUST HAVE GONE SOMETHING LIKE THIS

10

The reader may well be wondering about my own effects on Betafo's politics. Especially if one defines politics as mainly about the circulation of stories, the presence of a foreign researcher actively poking about trying to collect such accounts is ipso facto a political phenomenon. This is true, though it is not easy to document.

It was especially difficult to know exactly what stories were circulating about me. There appeared to be many of these. Most seemed to center on my backpack. Around Arivonimamo, this backpack became, in its own right, a kind of icon of hidden power. It was a small greenish backpack and I used to carry it with me everywhere, slung over one shoulder. It mainly served to hold my tape recorder—though it would usually also contain notebooks and pens, an astrological almanac and a plastic bag containing my collection of beads in the outer pocket, and often, an extra sweater. Apparently there was endless speculation about its true contents: tools for gold prospecting, high-tech surveillance equipment to monitor the nearby airfield, every imaginable kind of weapon. Almost everyone seemed to believe that I at least had a gun in there, and I suspect some of my best friends—who were constantly fretting and warning me about the dangers of bandits or drunken marauders on the roads at night—did not go out of their way to disabuse anyone of this impression. Opening the bag in front of strangers seemed to do nothing to dispel the rumors.

Even more than becoming the subject of stories, though, I became a medium for spreading them. My style of conducting research often consisted of little more than telling people the most interesting facts or stories that I had most recently heard from their neighbors: e.g., "Someone told me that there used to be a *Vazimba* in that valley . . ." Chantal used to tease me about

this all the time—I was supposed to be eliciting stories, not telling them—but if nothing else it was a simple way to let people know what sort of things I was interested in without asking too many leading questions.

Obviously, I didn't recount personal gossip, but in Betafo, even knowledge of the distant past was political. It was also very unevenly distributed. Most people knew little of their neighbor's family histories, so that I frequently found myself opening up what had been sequestered little pockets of tradition, often to the mild surprise of those I interviewed. This is particularly the case with stories that preserved a family grudge or tales of injustice, which, I found, were not the sort of thing normally bandied about to outsiders. Armand, for example, had had no idea that Norbert's family also claimed their ancestor had once been tied up and thrown in a pig sty; neither did he know much about Ralaitsivery's murder in 1903, except that it had happened, despite the fact that Ranaivo the Bolt had been telling the story to the village's *andriana* for years, and that some of his *mainty* neighbors in Andrianony, descended from the murderer's family, remembered the story very well indeed.

Rarely, though, did such revelations alter anyone's idea of what was really important about Betafo's history.[1] Neither I am aware of any overt conflicts that arose because of my presence, or because of what someone thought someone might have told me.[2] On the other hand, people certainly did argue through me. And my style of reporting narratives back and forth would occasionally set off a kind of a dialogic process where certain people would take off from something their neighbor had said, or that they thought they had, and fly off into all sorts of unexpected hypotheses.

What I want to do in this chapter is to present one brief sequence of encounters, partly to demonstrate some of the political play involved in researching history in Betafo, but also, in order to make a larger point about the active construction of history. Historical consciousness was not simply a matter of fixed narratives or half-remembered geographies. It was also the subject of constant speculation and invention. But before I develop this point, let me first tell a little story of my own.

An Encounter with Norbert

The closest I myself ever came to becoming an object of political dispute, in Betafo, came after I had been taking pictures of some tombs. Or, really, drawing them. For much of my fieldwork, you see, I had been without a camera;

the one I brought with me broke while I was still living in the capital, and it took months for me to come to the realization that, despite many protests to the contrary, none of the experts there had the parts required to fix it.

In early August I managed to borrow another one from a friend in the city, and on a Wednesday morning, the 8th of August, 1990, I walked up to Betafo for the first time with my new camera. Miadana and her husband were off somewhere, I forget where, but her son Dami and daughter Nivo suggested we head straight off and take pictures of the local tombs. This was something I had been intending to do for some time. I thought it would be nice to have a catalog of tombs, a photograph of each one with essential information written on the back: location, owners, *razambe* . . . So we spent the rest of the morning together, me taking pictures then scribbling down the angles the shots were taken from in a pocket notebook, asking questions and jotting down names.

We started on *tampon-tanana* then moved on to Avarakady, Andrianony (both seemed entirely deserted), and then finally across the dam and up the hill to Ambohitrimaninana. The latter place I wasn't even sure we should go, since I had only two shots left in the camera and there were four tombs there, but my companions insisted that since Ambohitrimaninana had by far the nicest tombs in Betafo, to feel it would be wrong to make a tour of tombs in Betafo and ignore the place completely. So I took two photographs and for the remaining tombs, had to resort to sketches. Around 1 o'clock PM, we headed back across the dam.

As we came past the flat rocks at the end of the dam and up to the strip of land to the east of Andrianony, Norbert came out to meet us. Actually, I had no idea who it was at the time. At that point, I had never met Norbert, and had only vaguely heard of him. So I didn't notice the fact that my companions were already silently cringing as he approached; all I knew was that there was a shortish man, probably in his forties, with a small mustache, carrying himself in a stiff, somewhat officious manner as he strode up the path in our direction. I started to call out a greeting; he ignored it, and as soon as he was about five feet in front of us burst into a loud and forceful diatribe in French.

After a minute or so, Nivo took advantage of a pause to stick out her head. "He doesn't speak French," she said, in Malagasy. He glared at her, hesitated a moment, then began again in Malagasy. What had we been doing up there at Ambohitrimaninana? Who had given us permission to go up there,

anyway? Taking some foreigner up to look at other people's tombs, snapping pictures, doing God knows what—how was he supposed to know I wasn't planting some kind of nuclear bomb up there? It was outrageous! Did we ask permission at the *fokontany* office, did we even so much as speak to the owners of the tomb? Had we no respect at all? The tirade was occasionally interrupted by gestures of great generosity, directed at me: if one asked, if one showed the slightest respect, it was not as if people would not cooperate—even if it were a matter of digging the tombs open on the spot so I could look inside, they would be willing to do it. But we hadn't even asked!

It was very hard to get a word in edgewise, but from the moment I realized what he was protesting about, I started trying to apologize. I was a foreigner, I explained. I was ignorant of local customs. I had no intention of insulting anyone. Just tell me what I should have done and I will certainly do it in the future. But while (as Nivo later pointed out) Norbert the whole time avoided even looking at the two teenagers, they were his real targets. I also don't think he had expected me to be so apologetic. It made it very difficult to maintain a front of outrage. In Malagasy, the phrase one uses to apologize is *miala tsiny,* "to remove the *tsiny*"—the meaning of *tsiny* falling somewhere between the English "guilt" and "blame", the recognition that one's actions have harmed others in an unjustifiable way. Finally, Norbert felt obliged to reluctantly reassure me: yes, well, with you there is no *tsiny.* With those other two, however—finally looking at Nivo and Dami—there is *tsiny.* And with that, he turned his back and walked away.

The three of us looked at each other, still slightly dazed, and then ourselves returned to *tampon-tanana.*

By the time we got there, their parents were already in; Claude lying in bed, Miadana and two younger daughters cutting up cucumbers and tomatoes for a salad and otherwise getting ready for lunch. Nivo and Dami immediately called everyone in to tell the story, each breathlessly cutting the other off to emphasize how angry Norbert had been, how terrified they had been while he was yelling at them,. "We didn't say anything," said Nivo. "David was like: '*Miala tsiny, miala tsiny* . . .' But we just didn't say anything at all."

"Well," I asked, "was it true, what he had been saying? Should we have asked first? I'm really sorry if it was me who was the cause of all of this . . ."

The response was unanimous. Of course not. Don't be ridiculous. There's no such custom. Hadn't everyone in Andrianony seen me go up to Ambohitrimaninana at least three or four times already, and practically every other

place where there are tombs for that matter? Has anyone ever objected before? Had anyone so much as suggested there might be some impropriety involved? No, Norbert just wanted an excuse to start a fight. He's always looking for some new excuse to pick a fight with us.

Before long, Haingo, Miadana's eldest daughter (the one who had married Norbert's eldest son Soanaivo), arrived, her baby in her arms. She had heard there had been some kind of confrontation. I produced the pack of cigarettes, someone else brought coffee, we all sat down and, as Haingo breastfed her baby, went over the story for her sake. Then we told it again for Jean Kely ("Little Jean")—another of Norbert's sons, who lived with Haingo and her husband in the lower apartment of Norbert's house. He had been clearing brush to the west of town, and appeared carrying his sickle. "So what is it that makes your father so ferocious?" asked Miadana, as he greeted everyone. Jean Kely replied by looking depressed and helpless. "My brother says we're caught between two families," he said, with a gesture to me.

Conversation continued for more than an hour, as Nivo and some of the other daughters periodically disappeared to help with lunch. It swirled around a number of topics, but the main theme was always the same: what is it that makes Norbert act that way? Everyone seemed determined to find some explanatory framework, some way to render him not entirely to blame for his behavior. Claude thought it was all because of his stomach. Norbert had an ulcer, which was something Claude could understand, since he had suffered for years from one. When his stomach wasn't acting up, he said, Norbert was fundamentally a simple person (*tsotra*). As soon as it did, the pain would carry him away, and he'd become ferocious, flying into a rage at the slightest provocation. Jean Kely was of a different opinion. It wasn't so much Norbert's stomach as his family. In winter, he was off on business most of the time; while he was away, his wife Juliette was left in charge of a household crowded full of children; she would be threatening everyone with his wrath if they were disobedient, and saving up her complaints against the neighbors until he came home. The moment he did come home, he would have to listen to an endless list of grievances, complaints, misdeeds . . . Finally it would just overwhelm him.

Miadana agreed that Juliette was definitely at the origin of the problem. He had always been a simple person before she married him. In fact, it was largely Miadana who came up with the final synthesis. Juliette was always starting fights, especially between her children and his, she said. When Norbert got

home she'd start narrating and complaining. When she did, Norbert's mind would start working and working and he would get more and more aggravated. And then that would set off his stomach. Before long, he'd be looking for a fight. On this occasion, he had only just got back a few hours before he saw two of Miadana's children—his favorite targets—strolling off to Ambohitrimaninana with me, so that must be what had happened: he was already mad, so he prepared to lie in wait for us.[3]

By the time lunch was on the table, the family had come to at least a rough consensus. One thing with which everyone could agree was that Juliette, Norbert's current wife, was primarily to blame: not surprising, since one thing Miadana's family, and Norbert's children by his first wife, all had in common was their dislike and fear of her. The process of coming up with the final account, though, was something between an act of narrative interpretation and one of narrative construction: the family was collectively trying to determine a version of the day's events acceptable to everyone—in which, interestingly enough, it was one party's irresponsible telling of history that was ultimately to blame.

Over lunch, Damien suddenly suggested something else. Normally, he said, Norbert's family avoided me. (This was a point everyone had stressed a great deal earlier, when telling me how ridiculous he was to suggest I should have asked them before going up to Ambohitrimaninana. Normally, many said, they wouldn't even talk to me.) It was possible that this was Norbert's way of establishing some kind of relationship. Several others seconded this. If nothing else it provided an opportunity for me to talk to him, because—as Miadana quickly added—when he was not consumed with rage he was really very easy to talk to, a very reasonable person, and probably knew a lot about local history to boot. The thought had flickered through my head at one point too that he might be making some kind of overture, so I quickly agreed. But should I go over now? Would he even be there? Or should I wait till tomorrow? The consensus was that I had best go now, in fact he was probably expecting me; anyway, he would almost certainly be leaving early the next morning. Though—and here Miadana and Haingo were both adamant—I had to promise them that when I was in the house, I must not touch any sort of food they offered me, not even so much as a cup of coffee, lest I end up married to one of Juliette's daughters. After a bit of nervous laughter, they sent me on my way.

I walked to his house in Andrianony, called out *haody-o!* at the door, and

waited. Norbert had indeed been expecting me. A daughter appeared almost immediately to escort me up the narrow stairs to the second floor, and there Norbert was waiting in the reception room, its floor covered with woven mats, with pillow-like *seza baola,* "ball chairs," arranged around the walls. There were two or three grave-looking men in checkered Malabary sitting with him as I entered, but even before he rose to greet me, they quickly made their excuses to leave, passing in typical Malagasy fashion, stooping so low their hands nearly brushed the ground so as not to be higher than those seated, and heading down the stairs.

I sat down.

I began by explaining that I was hoping he could give me some guidance on local customs, so as to ensure I would not make the same mistakes as I had earlier in the day. Norbert though wasn't very interested in talking about that. Here in Madagascar, he said, everything always has its owners, you just have to ask them. That's all. When I tried to bring up a couple hypothetical examples, he brushed them aside and instead started talking about history.

This, I gathered, was his way of being conciliatory. Norbert was obviously one of those people constantly doing things he had reason to regret, but willing to make amends only on condition no one talks about it. He began with a brief history of the tombs of Ambohitrimaninana, since this was something I was clearly interested in. But the way he began also revealed he had another motive in wanting to talk with me:

> Norbert: The population here in Betafo is divided into two parts. The real descendants of Betafo, who come from here, are the descendants of Andrianamboninolona; the rest are the descendants of their servants. And these descendants of servants (including the descendants of Rainitamaina): all of them have their tombs there at Ambohitrimaninana. As for the descendants of Andrianamboninolona: their tombs are here in town.

There followed the usual disclaimers about how he was a mere youth of the present day and did not know the history, Ratsizafy and Armand would probably be better able to tell me the details, that the southern-most tomb was the first of them, and the rest spun off from that. He noted that many foreigners chide the Malagasy for wasting their money on tombs and dead bodies while their children, often, don't have books for school. He wanted to know if I agreed with them. I told him it wasn't my part as a foreigner to tell Malagasy people what to do. He was skeptical of this: why not? He told me a little about the history of his own family, then asked me if I had any questions.

There was one obvious one.

It is surprising, I said, what you say about the descendants of Rainitamaina. Because I have myself heard that they were never slaves, but in fact, a kind of *andriana*.

From Ratsizafy, I suppose? I nodded. Well, said Norbert, the thing you have to understand about Ratsizafy is that sometimes his behavior can be . . . well, he pretends a little bit. Do you understand what I'm saying? He doesn't always speak the absolute truth. Probably his ancestors were originally slaves taken from some other part of Madagascar, from Diego up north, Betsileo to the south . . .

David: Betsileo. Ratsizafy says they're from Betsileo.
Norbert: Betsileo. From Fianarantsoa. So that should be clear enough, because you have people like that in the history of any nation: whether it's America, France, or England. Italy I don't know. . . .
David: Italy? I'm not . . . Oh, yeah, sure, there were lots of slaves in ancient Rome.
Norbert: So there used to be people who were servants. And they would be bought and sold. So it should be clear enough what happened: people from over there were taken up to the markets here in Imerina, and sold here.
David: So there really used to be markets like that?
Norbert: The markets, I know about: they were called "meeting places" [*fihoanana*]. And "come over here, boy!"—they'd take the really strong ones to the market. They'd test their endurance, have three men hold onto a rope and then make them try to drag it . . . So they brought them here and sold them. And some of the ones sold here were from Fianarantsoa. That's the origin of that history.

And now some of them would know how to do things [*mahay zavatra*]. They'd have skills, artistic skills. They were what was called *mpiantsa. Mpiantsa,* they used to call them. The *andriana*'s *mpiantsa.* Singers. Dancers. Eh? And there were others who really had to work.
David: So there were different kinds . . .
Norbert: So there were different kinds, and those who were made *mpiantsa;* they wouldn't have to do any real service, they'd just let them sing. [he mimes a little mincing gesture with both hands, to one side and then the other, then laughs] That's why you have some people saying "Us, we're from Fianarantsoa," "We're from Betsileo, we didn't have to do any of *that.*" Probably they were just the *mpiantsa.* Eh?
David: This is fascinating.
Norbert: And there were also those who didn't know how to do that, so they really had to work. That's how it was.

And there were also those who had a certain appeal to the little children; they fascinated the children so they made them nannies [*mpitaiza*]. Or others, they just had them tend to household chores. And others, they would even take

> as concubines. Eh? This girl is kind of attractive, kind of cute, so "you can just tend to the bed here," they'd say—that's how it was. They were given a definite position—"you just do this, you just do that," and that was all they had to do. That's what it was like.

But, I asked, what would happen if one of these concubines got pregnant? Would the child still be a slave? Norbert said that yes, they would, but chances are they'd be sent to some other place, sold, or maybe even sent off and be secretly killed if their parents were so important that their existence might prove embarrassing.

But of course, he added, all that is over now. In the present day, what does it even matter who was a slave and who wasn't; now it's only money that makes a difference. If you have money, after all, it doesn't matter who you are. You may be old and ugly, but if you have money, you can still get yourself an eighteen-year old girl to share your bed. Or . . . (it seemed to occur to him that emphasizing money rather dulled the egalitarian point he really wanted to make) it's not really money, even, nowadays. Or shouldn't be. What really matters is your work.

I would hear such statements fairly often, when speaking in the abstract with descendants of slaves—as if they felt obliged to state the matter as a principle, if nothing else, to make it clear that they felt such things really shouldn't matter, even though it was obvious that they did. Coming from a man so notoriously bitter as Norbert, it was particularly transparent. Not to mention a man who had, quite possibly, arranged the whole confrontation and subsequent interview with me by annoyance at the idea that I might possibly get suckered in by Ratsizafy and Armand's claims that they weren't really descended from slaves.

We ended up in a prolonged discussion of racial problems in America; I suggested that since Americans like to think of themselves as people without history, the presence of one part of the population descended from slaves seems a particularly intractable problem, since their history really can't just be ignored. Well, said Norbert, as if weighing the idea, maybe all this history should just be buried after all. Maybe it would be better if we could all forget. I was about to say that it perhaps it wasn't a matter of forgetting what happened, perhaps we should always remember that; maybe the problem was that everyone still could see themselves as descendants of either one side or the other, the slave-owners or the slaves. That's because black people and white

people hardly ever intermarry. If everyone would just mix together . . . But then I stopped, realizing that, given Norbert's particular domestic situation, taking such a line would probably not be such a good idea.

I never did have another complete conversation with Norbert. I ran into him now and then, but every time it was with a crowd, most often with a work crew in the fields, or playing cards outside Augustin's. When we did talk it mostly consisted of him making wisecracks on his usual themes of work and sex and money—always an effective way to keep someone at arm's length. I never pressed him. Clearly he had said what he wanted to say.

Other Interpretations

Now, I do not know whether Norbert expected me to immediately go off and tell Ratsizafy and Armand what he had said about their ancestor. Perhaps he had been consciously trying to annoy them; perhaps he suspected they would end up knowing he had talked to me but uncertain just what he had said, and liked the idea of others silently fretting about the matter. Then again, he might have been acting impulsively, not giving a moment's thought to the consequences. Anyway, I did not tell Armand or Ratsizafy what he said.

I did tell some people. Miadana, for instance. Ratsizafy's claims had always put Miadana in a particularly difficult position, because she wanted so badly not to offend local sensibilities that she seemed to have been struggling to convince herself they might be true. The first time she mentioned Rainitamaina was during her first description of the ordeal of 1987,[4] in which she drew half on Ratsizafy's own claims about his ancestor, and half on Dada Leva's most dismissive accusations against him: Rainitamaina, she said, had been a rival *andriana* who quarreled with the Andrianamboninolona and ended up being exiled from *tampon-tanana.* A curious synthesis which if nothing else, showed how often people are presented with multiple strands of possible interpretation without knowing how to quite fit them together, and thus are capable of patching together any number of different syntheses depending on what seems appropriate to the occasion. Anyway, hearing Norbert's interpretation gave her license to reconsider, and she seemed perfectly willing to accept that it might be true—though again, I'm not sure whether she would have repeated it to anybody else.

What really excited me about my conversation with Norbert though was his description of the different statuses of slaves. This, at least, was something

I *could* ask other people about—and I tried my best to find someone else who could confirm or supplement his account. To my great frustration, this proved nearly impossible. Mostly I got blank stares and claims of ignorance. The closest I found to confirmation was from the local schoolteacher, Madame Mariel, and what she had to say about the matter had almost nothing in common with Norbert.

I have already had several occasions to mention Mariel and her husband Rakotojaona. They were not actually from Betafo; they were both of *andriana* descent, but basically city people from other parts of Imerina. She had been posted to teach at Betafo's primary school, located in Belanitra, a year and half before; they had a house in which to stay in Belanitra, but they only stayed there two or three nights a week; for the most part they lived in Arivonimamo where Rakotojaona was busy trying to organize local silk weavers into a craft cooperative, and working within the local branch of the MFM—the same party Armand was involved with. He was a balding man of fifty, with a round face, deep voice, glasses, and cultivated manner; his desk was covered with objets de art collected in various parts of Madagascar, yellowing pamphlets on cultural topics, and newsletters from leftist and pacifist organizations in France. Mariel was younger, about Miadana's age, and exuded an air of cheerful competence perfectly suited for her line of work.

When Rakotojaona talked about Betafo, or Malagasy customs, he tended toward analysis or description. Mariel told stories.[5] Many of these stories were culled from her pupils, whom she would encourage to report on scandalous goings-on. The pleasure she took in passing them on to me seemed so sincere as to make her somehow innocent. Or . . . perhaps what I liked about Mariel was the fact that, outsider though she was, she never used such stories to condemn the community,[6] to distance herself from it; if anything, it was more like a gesture of participation. It was as if she recognized how important gossip was to the conduct of local politics, and that for this reason, Betafo's gossip was very, very good gossip—full of arresting images of love magic congealing into snakes emerging from the rocks, disappearing ancestors, catechists possessed by spirits on the sly—and that passing it on was as close as she could come to participation. In other words, her attraction to it was not all that different from mine. (In fact, I felt such an affinity that I sometimes found myself wondering just how much of the more extravagant stories she repeated she literally believed—though I ultimately concluded this was not really an appropriate question; any good storyteller knows that, if a story is

good enough, and seems to have some broader significance, its literal truth can simply not be much of a relevant consideration.[7])

Like Miadana, Mariel and her husband had never been quite sure what to make of Ratsizafy. Most of their friends were from Belanitra, an *andriana* community equally divided between one faction firmly allied with Ratsizafy, and another that despised him.[8] This, and the fact that they were outsiders meant they had heard very mixed things. Rakotojaona's impression was that Ratsizafy was, indeed, an *andriana* of a sort, but, as he put it, with some admixture of "black blood." He made the obvious point that whatever their origins, members of the Rainitamaina lineage seemed to only marry *mainty*, so even if that was not a comment on their real origins, they were definitely mixed by now.

One day I was visiting their house in Soanirano in the north of Arivonimamo, and I told Mariel something about my conversation with Norbert, and asked her if she had ever heard anything on the subject of *mpiantsa,* and the idea that there might have been ranks among slaves. It was pretty obvious she hadn't, but that certainly did not stop her from improvising. She immediately began patching together bits and pieces from different sources to create an account of what Norbert must have been talking about. It started in the same way: people were captured in war, and then sold at marketplaces, and some, yes, they "knew how to do things" so they got better jobs. There, however, the similarities ended:

> David: And he also said that in ancient times, there were, like, ranks amongst the servants. That there were some who "knew how to do things," such as the *mpiantsa* who knew how to sing . . .
> Mariel: Yes, and their only work was to give *hasina* to the *andriana*'s medicine—that's why they say they "knew how to intone" [*miantsa*]. Yes, intoning . . . have you noticed how over at Ratsizafy's, when they're going at it, you hear that: "di di di di di di. . . ." That's it. They just did that.
> David: You mean . . . playing the *valiha*?
> Mariel: Yes, and singing so as to bring out the *andriana*'s *Vazimba*. That's what they mean by "know how to do things," and that's all they would have to do from morning until night. That is to say: they didn't have to attend to the crops or herd cattle or do anything in the fields, anything having to do with food; because they got to live near the *andriana*, and just fan away flies all day and chant for the *valiha* players and sing—and that's why they say: there were different ranks among them—they might have all been slaves, but there were ranks among them.
> David: So that may be the real story of Ratsizafy: he was the one who gave *hasina* to the medicine?
> Mariel: Yes, they definitely did have those who do that. And there were others

who just guarded the *andriana*. They were just guards; they didn't have to do anything else aside from that.
David: Like soldiers?
Mariel: Soldiers. And there were, those who were like, just messengers for the *andriana*. Say, the *andriana*needed water because—well, they always have their springs. Any place where there's *fanasinana* there's always a spring—that's where the water for bathing is. So when the *andriana* needed clean water, from an undying spring, one that doesn't dry in winter, there was a messenger whose job was just to do that. A water-carrier. Or if it was pieces of wood the *andriana* needed, they'd search for it in the fields. Or if the *andriana* needed certain leaves, then they'd fetch that from the fields—that was the only work they had to do. And that's why they say there were ranks among the servants.

Then there were also those called "with a spirit sitting on them." Those with a spirit sitting on them would have even better knowledge, that is, they would know even more about herbs. *Zanadrano*, you know—that's what you would call them.
David: Oh, so *Zanadrano* were a kind of servant?
Mariel: They were servants who were also *Zanadrano*. Wherever there were *andriana*, you would find *Zanadrano*. Wherever there were servants, some would be *Zanadrano*. All the *andriana* would have to do was give orders—"go get this, get that, get this"—and they would be the ones who'd have to go and get it.

Note how the word *andriana* is kept intrinsically ambiguous: it's not clear whether it refers to kings, aristocrats of some sort, or the *andriana* population of Betafo as a whole. The main images she seems to be drawing on are twofold: that of a royal court, or conceivably that of some great magnate (in the past), and that of the sanctuary of one of the ancient kings employed by spirit mediums (in the present). The former, the living monarchs, would be surrounded by guards, astrologers, mediums, all sorts of experts in medicine. An educated person was likely to be familiar with such arrangements through any number of different media: history books, radio dramas, newspapers, school lectures, and so on. The spirits in turn were all assumed to have been kings, or at least grandees, during their lifetime; now, their *doany* were almost always accompanied with a sacred spring, in which one had to bathe before entering the royal precinct, and contained a smaller tomb said to belong to one of their "servants" or "soldiers"—one of their slaves—whose spirits, in curing ceremonies often acted to fetch things for their lord. And their tombs were of course also surrounded by *Zanadrano*, their mediums, who were normally the descendants of slaves. The result was a tumble of images of living and dead *andriana*, which probably had next to nothing to do with the practice of nineteenth-century slavery, but provided a fascinating window on contemporary ideas about the nature of social power.

One is tempted to call Norbert's account the naturalistic one, Mariel's account mystified, fantastic. Actually, I suspect neither has very much to do with the realities of nineteenth-century Betafo. Norbert's distinction between house slaves and field slaves is also, no doubt, inspired by ideas about how royal courts were organized, or at least the households of the wealthiest court grandees, who tended to live in the region surrounding the capital. In more obscure places like Betafo, where even the richest families usually had little more than a dozen slaves, shared out between at least that many people, there could have been little room for specialized troops of singers and dancers—or even nursemaids and concubines with no other work to do.

Most of Norbert's conversation played on three themes: money, work, and sex. Work will get you money. Money will get you sex. Sexual allure will get you off from work. It was, obviously, a very gendered discourse. His basic model for work was labor in the fields: dragging, lifting, digging. Real slaves had to work. The lucky ones escaped that fate because they knew how to fascinate, to seduce the minds and senses of their masters: they "fascinated" the children and so they became nursemaids; they were sexually alluring, and so they ended up with nothing to do but "tending to the bed"; they distracted them with song and dance, entertained them, gave them pleasure, and so became *mpiantsa.* Aside from the *mpiantsa,* all his examples are of females, and the little mime he performed, with coy smile and delicate hand gestures, made it clear he considered being a *mpiantsa,* too, an effeminate occupation. All this was a very effective way of mocking Ratsizafy, who might not have been a singer or dancer but who used music as one of the main tools in his curing, and who had become very wealthy as a result. He too (such was the implication) was a man who seduces the mind and senses with his skill at performance, and who had thereby risen above his fellow slaves to a life of ease and luxury.

But to make his point, he also completely misrepresented history. In fact, male slaves did not really have to work harder than female ones. If anything, the exact opposite was the case. The men were often far away; women, more likely to live near their masters where they could be much more systematically exploited.

Where for Norbert, the issue at hand was the power of certain slaves to influence their masters, Mariel's account was entirely concerned with the power of the masters themselves. It was the *andriana* in this case who initiated everything. They gave orders to their slaves; the slaves, for all their

knowledge, were merely instruments of their will, dutifully performing the required ceremonies and creating powerful medicine for their masters. I have already spoken of how many accounts seem to draw a tacit analogy between slaves and soldiers—people under orders—and medicine: since like those who give orders, those who employ *ody* are taking a being capable of autonomous action and reducing it a mere extension of their will. But in Mariel's account the *andriana* are doing both. There is a double displacement of intentionality. While she does not completely identify the two—she doesn't say that *all* slaves were involved in making medicine (most, presumably, still had to spend their days laboring in the fields or minding cattle) in so far as she does, this has the result of taking the perfectly visible and explicit forms of domination on which slavery was based and making it yet another way of creating subtle, invisible forms of influencing others. It was only once the slaves were set free, presumably, that this invisible power was suddenly left in the hands of men like Ratsizafy. The final conclusion was yet another variant on an old *andriana* theme: how the *andriana*'s own acts of oppression, of subordinating others, had finally come back to haunt them. *Ny tody tsy misy fa ny atao no miverina:* "Divine retribution may not exist, but what you do comes back to you."

Speculative Hypotheses and Historical Understanding

If one thing should be clear by now, it is that the dialogic process I described in the first section of this chapter can be very messy and unpredictable. An encounter with an irate neighbor leads to hours of collective efforts to come up with an acceptable explanation for the man's behavior; it also leads to an interview in which the same man attacks the pretensions of one of the villages' most prominent figures by appealing to his own reconstruction of the past. When I float his version of the past to others, no one really seems to recognize it, or anyway no one has very much to say about the matter. The one exception is the local schoolteacher, really an outsider, who mainly used it as a platform for improvising her own completely different idea of what history was like . . .

One could take this example to illustrate the haphazard, unpredictable nature of fieldwork—or for that matter, of political life in Betafo—the constant manipulation of impressions, the quirky, arbitrary nature of the personalities involved, their interests and perspectives often so different there was no way to predict what aspect of things a given person would consider important. None

of this, however, is what I really want to emphasize right now. What I really want to emphasize is the constructed nature of the resulting narratives. All of these conversations involved the creation of stories, implicit or explicit, and none of them involved anything like already-constituted knowledge. These were not stories the tellers were simply repeating (perhaps with their own variations and additions) but stories they were inventing on the spot. In fact, the process in each case consisted of something that much more resembled historical inquiry. The narrators were consciously trying to explain something by evoking the pattern of the past, then reconstructing the hypothetical links which would connect the past and present. It is worthwhile to consider this process in more detail, I think, because it shows that the differences between how an outside analyst looks at a community's history and the way its own inhabitants can look at it are not always as different as one might otherwise be inclined to think.

Take the conversation at Miadana's house. Such conversations happened all the time. Practically the moment there was anything resembling a confrontation, any event involving an obvious element of conflict, that event was instantly surrounded by a huge amount of talk. Everyone immediately began trying to determine precisely what had happened, what to make of it, as well as of course trying to coordinate an appropriate response.[9] It was in cases like these, especially, that the circulation of talk mapped out lines of alliance and solidarity: a family (*fianakaviana*) could even be defined as a group which automatically conferred together in a crisis. Outside of families, this was the great measure of trust or mistrust[10]—alliances and lines of solidarity were constantly being reaffirmed, created, undermined, or broken by who took confidence in who, or to what degree, who were effectively collaborating in coming up with an account of what had happened, and who were shut out of the discussion. In this light, a *fokon'olona* meeting could be thought of as just a slightly more formal continuation of this kind of conversation: though it is also often a self-conscious effort to overcome the implicit divisions of mistrust by asserting that whenever there are conflicts that clearly affected everyone who lived in a given vicinity, then they should *all* get together to discuss it.

Even within smaller groups, such as the one which met in Miadana's front room that Wednesday afternoon, some of the principles guiding *fokon'olona* meetings were tacitly applied. *Fokon'olona* meetings—especially those that take the form of trials—also aim to establish the rights and wrongs of the matter at hand by constructing a definitive narrative. Even more, it was considered a

matter of creating an active consensus: not only should the narrative be acceptable to everyone, but everyone in attendance should ideally play some role in shaping it; so in the discussion at Miadana's, though some people clearly felt more entitled to take the floor than others, there seemed to be an active feeling that the matter could not really be considered settled unless everyone there had contributed something to the final outcome.

Obviously, such discussions are profoundly political phenomena. It is precisely through such discussions that political action has its effect, since it is here that it is molded into narrative, and the process of circulation and assessment begins. It is reasonable to assume that, if Norbert did not expect his confrontational behavior would spark such a discussion, he would not have engaged in it. This might not have been directly acknowledged in the discussion itself, but the final conclusion—that it was Juliette's irresponsible style of narration that was the ultimate root of the problem—certainly implied some recognition of the importance of what they were trying to do. We, the logic seemed to be, are trying to create a story that can bring people together (at the very least, the people in the room). She uses her stories to drive them apart.

Stories like these are also, almost by definition, ephemeral: as we've seen, the memory of conflicts and grievances should not become the stuff of historical consciousness—and for the most part, it does not. When it does, it is normally kept hidden within families, and does not widely circulate. Most politics do not translate into history.

What connects the story Miadana's family concocted with Norbert and Mariel's more abstract historical reflections is more the process by which the creators went about their work. In each case, someone was creating a story about the past in order to explain a present situation. "Why did Norbert go out and pick a fight with us today?" "Why does Ratsizafy insist on making these unlikely claims about his ancestry?" There is nothing particularly unusual about this, of course. But the way they go about it is interesting. The process involves at least two stages:

(1) First, one creates something that rather resembles an ethnographic description. I call it that because it is essentially static; it maps out certain ongoing, repetitive processes which are assumed to be uniformly characteristic of a certain space and time. Usually these take the form of habitual patterns of action, which do not change over time but simply recur. Norbert goes off on business, when he comes home, his wife aggravates him with her stories, then his stomach starts acting up. The implication is that it always happens

the same way. Note too how there is only a short step from this kind of description to the kind of institutional analysis of slavery offered by Norbert or Mariel: slaves were captured and sold in markets, those with skills were given certain kinds of jobs . . . The sense of repetition, of constancy, is what gives the description its rhetorical effect: this is simply the way things work—or used to.

(2) Having mapped out the ground, as it were, the narrator proceeds to speculate, demonstrating how the present situation, the thing to be explained, could have arisen from it. "It must have gone something like this." What they are doing, in effect, is creating a hypothetical narrative in which the characters in question are armed with the means or motivation to act the way they are already assumed to have acted. Sometimes this narrative is entirely explicit, as it was at Miadana's: Norbert came home, his wife complained, his stomach started acting up; just at that moment he saw his in-laws taking a foreigner up to Ambohitrimaninana. In the other two cases, the story itself is basically implicit; it is left to the listener to pull it all together:

> Norbert's version: Ratsizafy's ancestors were slaves who used their skills as entertainers to avoid real work and live lives of relative ease and luxury in the nobles' court. After liberation they continued to support themselves, in part, by artistic seduction of the senses, and to live well. As a result they felt so superior to the descendants of field slaves around them that Ratsizafy has began to claim they were never slaves at all, but are themselves nobles.
> Mariel's version: Ratsizafy's ancestors were slaves skilled in the use of medicine, and who therefore got to live in the nobles' house and spend their time performing rituals meant to increase their master's hidden power. After liberation they continued to have the same expertise, but used it for their own purposes, and so have, themselves, attained a kind of power similar to what the nobles used to have. As a result, they even begin to think of themselves as nobles.

The difference between the two accounts, however, reveals something crucial about these initial descriptions. They are not simply descriptions of a way of life, or institutional analyses. Encoded within them lie a whole set of implicit theories about the nature of human action in the world, sociologies, theories of power and desire, even theories of how the mind interacts with the body. At the very least, one might say, they always contain (1) certain ideas of agency, that is, capacities for action, and (2) certain notions of value, which could motivate it.[11] What's more, these are not identical to the notions of agency and value current in the narrator's culture, or not with all of them; after all, these would hardly need to be stated explicitly—they are the one thing

that can presumably always be taken for granted. They are a particular selection of elements from it that make sense together as a pattern. Hence the differences between the two accounts. Norbert was from the beginning interested in how things seemed from the point of view of slaves; therefore, he assumes the most significant sorts of power are ways of influencing or seducing the powerful. Mariel was more inclined to spontaneously identify with the perspectives of the powerful, for all that she might have seen them as morally ambivalent characters: hence, the conceptions of agency that seemed relevant were all concerned with the old *andriana* issues of soldiers, orders, relations of command.

One obvious question is how all this relates to the narrative frameworks described in chapter 5. These frameworks too were arbitrarily bounded in space and time, armed their characters with certain capacities for action, and contained specific stakes. In fact, they seem basically similar, with the difference that here, much of the ideological effect seems to be reversed, because in this case the rules are, one might say, actively conjured up in order to explain the outcome of the game.[12]

In fact, the process in question, of taking an event and placing it in some larger, ongoing historical context, then using one's knowledge of how things worked to imaginatively reconstruct how it must have come about, is something historians do all the time. Anyone who is writing history, or simply trying to reconstruct past events, must do this. That's why it seems to me that one advantage of applying an historical, rather than a more explicitly scientific, way of knowing to the study of a community like Betafo is that it makes it impossible to create a fundamental gap between the analyst and the object of study. What I am doing is, in many ways, an activity that people in Betafo—and not only intellectuals like Mariel, but also farmers and traders like Norbert and Jean Kely—engage in all the time. I might have certain advantages (a lot more free time, a distanced perspective, knowledge of social theory and comparative cases) and disadvantages (infinitely less practical understanding of the language and culture, less experience), we might have very different sets of agendas, but there is no absolute, fundamental divide.

In fact, the basic structure of this book has been almost precisely the same as that of speculative frameworks of this sort. I have started with an event that needs explanation—the ordeal of 1987 and its aftermath—and then tried, laboriously, to reconstruct the historical universe in which it took

place, so that the reader can understand something of what authority, morality, community, action means here. Only after that have I been able to slowly turn to individuals and events, and then finally, to the specific events in question, by reconstructing how they must have happened—a process that cannot be separated at any point from the process of their interpretation.

CATASTROPHE

11

By now it should be easier to understand how there could have been so much tension in Betafo; so much mistrust between the *andriana*, most of whom were increasingly impoverished farmers, and Betafo's *mainty* population, who seemed to be doing relatively well. In this chapter, I can finally answer some of the questions posed in the introduction: what exactly had happened in 1987, when a communal ordeal meant to reassert the solidarity of the community ended up being remembered as the final proof that solidarity was ultimately impossible, and thus marking a definitive split between the two.

If one has to define a starting point for the series of events that directly lead up to the disaster of 1987, the logical place would be Ratsizafy's second marriage, twenty years before, to an *andriana* woman from Belanitra. It was this marriage, more than anything else, which made Ratsizafy's claims to status an issue, something local *andriana* could not simply ignore, because it meant there was now at least a handful of fellow *andriana* who were committed to defending them. In the end, the community of Belanitra itself (entirely composed of *andriana*) split into factions; this, in turn, sharpened the opposition to Ratsizafy on the part of the vast majority of *andriana* not directly involved in the conflict, at the same time as it only heightened Ratsizafy's own desire to win them over. The fact that his wealth, and his fame outside Betafo, continued to grow greater and greater during all this time did nothing to make matters any simpler. It was the tensions generated by this situation that finally burst (partly) into the open in 1987.

Background

Betafo's *andriana* were probably already talking about the decline of their community even before the fire in 1931. The great families were already disappearing; fewer people remained, and those that remained were doing worse. But at the time, no one could have been talking yet about the rising fortunes of their former slaves. Out of the 250 residents of the eastern *fokontany* in 1921, black people made up only a fifth—and most of them were landless laborers.[1]

Thirty years later, in 1959, on the eve of Malagasy independence, matters had not much changed. True, the *andriana* population had dipped sharply—to around 115—but the number of mainty had risen only slightly, to 71, and most were still extremely poor.[2] It was in the 1960s that things really began to change.

Not that Madagascar's independence, in 1960, made much of a difference for rural society. The new government kept almost all of the old, colonial institutions in place: the same administrative system, tax collection, and gendarmes. In Betafo, the man responsible for representing the community before the state authorities continued to be the same: an *andriana* of relatively modest origins named Razafindrazaka, whose official title was *notable*—a position roughly equivalent to the modern *President Fokontany*. Razafindrazaka was one of three brothers who made up the core of the andriana presence in Andrianony; the other most prominent of Betafo's andriana were Raoelizaka, who had recently moved back to *tampon-tanana,* and the old eccentric Rakotonarivo Auguste, who was still living in his great mansion in Atsimonkady—the last vestige of the former great families. Rakotonarivo and the *notable* were good friends, and joint sponsors of the greatest projects of the times: the rebuilding of Andrianambololona's tomb on *tampon-tanana* in 1967.

The center of Betafo had, it will be remembered, laid largely abandoned after the fire of '31, and even the tomb had fallen into disrepair.[3] Old people still spoke glowingly of how the village filled with ox carts and workmen as far as the eye could see, dragging vast stones and laying down concrete; of the crowds assembled from all over Madagascar for the *famadihana*, the great speech Rakotonarivo delivered in dedicating the new tomb (with its exactly dated inscriptions), of the music, feasting and dancing afterward.[4] It was a glorious moment, but almost as soon as it was over, the order that created it started a precipitous decline. The three brothers had a great falling out and

then died one by one over the course of the next five or six years; by the end all were so alienated from one another that they were buried in three different tombs. Their children scattered. Within a decade Andrianony had become an almost entirely *mainty* settlement.[5] Rakotonarivo Auguste's mansion collapsed only a few years after the dedication; he spent the last few years of his life in his wife's old house in her natal village of Belanitra, increasingly sickly, until he finally died in 1974. By the time of the political upheavals of 1972–1975, which led to the collapse of the machinery of repression and eventually, withdrawal of the state, the local representatives of that order were already dying out.

It is against this backdrop that Ratsizafy's rising fortunes can best be understood. When Ratsizafy came into his own, in 1961, he had already been Betafo's most prominent astrologer for at least a decade. His work gave him access to money, and he appears to have been very skillful in investing it. Ratsizafy was among the first to take advantage of Rakotonarivo Auguste's financial woes during the 1960s, and he ended up with the largest single share of his former holdings. Not only that, he developed a reputation as a man always willing to produce money for a loan, whenever an *andriana* was in trouble—loans which were in many cases really just euphemisms for land sales, or which anyway ended up that way. Particularly in a time when the power of the state was in retreat, his reputation for having enormous resources of hidden power must have strengthened his hand enormously heading off any resulting disputes.

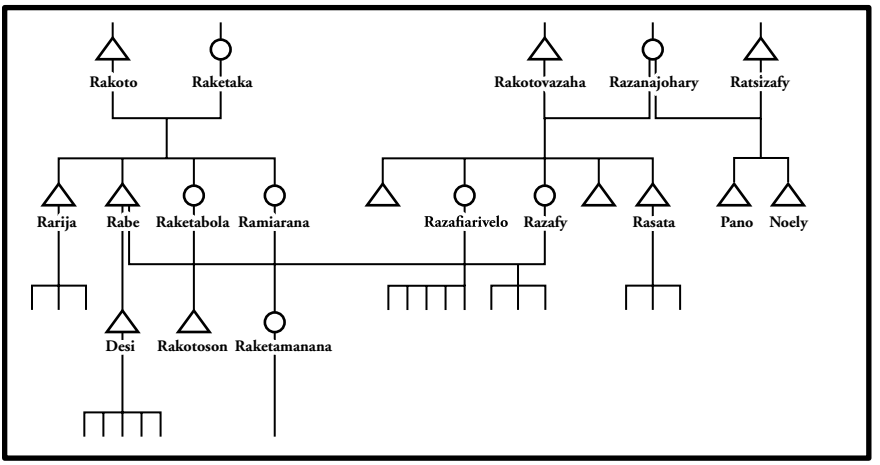
In 1967—the same year as the great *famadihana*—when Ratsizafy was sixty-one years old, he married Razanajohary, an *andriana* from the village of Belanitra.[6] Razanajohary was already forty-five years old but she was of proven fertility—having already had six children by her former husband, the youngest born only a year or two before. And indeed she quickly bore Ratsizafy two sons: Pano, in 1968, and then Noely, on Christmas day 1970. Not only did he finally have children, then, to inherit his position, he also had a number of important allies in Belanitra who now had every reason to defend his assertions that he too was, in some way, an *andriana*. It is quite likely that he would never have felt in a position to build his magnificent new tomb at Ambohitrimaninana in 1978, with its ostentatious *trano manara,* without having won acceptance for his claims by at least some of Andrianamboninolona's descendants.

Belanitra

Now, to understand how this marriage could take place, one has to understand something about the village of Belanitra. For most of this century, it has been the largest single settlement in the eastern *fokontany* of Betafo, and has always been entirely *andriana*. It was also notoriously difficult for a stranger to break into. After my first interview with Rajaona, the *President Fokontany*, for example, I never got to speak to the man again, despite sporadic overtures. He always had something else to do. His attitude was, I was told, typical of Belanitra: inwards looking, suspicious, not comfortable dealing with outsiders. They were notorious for only marrying each other. But at least in the present, they are also famous for being extraordinarily poor.

Almost all the land in the thin valley between Ratsizafy's settlement in Morafeno and the village of Belanitra belongs to members of two of Belanitra's families: the southern half, to the descendants of Rakotovazaha (Razanajohary's husband before she married Ratsizafy); the northern, to the descendants of a couple called Rakoto and Raketaka, who died in the 1920s.[7] The fields are mostly tiny, mediocre in quality, and difficult to work. In neither case do they provide anywhere near enough rice to feed their present-day descendants. At least when I was in Betafo, when one of them descended into the valley, it was much more likely to be in order to seek work in Morafeno as to work their own fields. In the winter, most picked up a good deal of their cash income doing odd jobs for Ratsizafy: cutting wood, painting, building fences, or tending sheep. In purely economic terms this is not, perhaps, surprising. These are some of the poorest people in Betafo, and Ratsizafy was rich. He had far more land than he could work himself, and plenty of money to pay for laborers. They were in desperate need of cash. On the other hand, white people tend to avoid getting involved in ongoing relations of wage labor of any kind, let alone with those they do not consider kin. For an *andriana*, however poor, finding oneself in the regular employ of a descendant of one's own former slaves would have been the ultimate humiliation. But these *andriana* did not see Ratsizafy as a descendant of slaves; or anyway, they insisted he too was a kind of *andriana*.

By marrying Razanajohary after the death of her husband Rakotovazaha, Ratsizafy managed to largely win over both of these two families. Rakotovazaha's (d. 1966) six children were of course Razanajohary's too; and all looked on Ratsizafy as a sort of father.[8] They were the ones who appeared



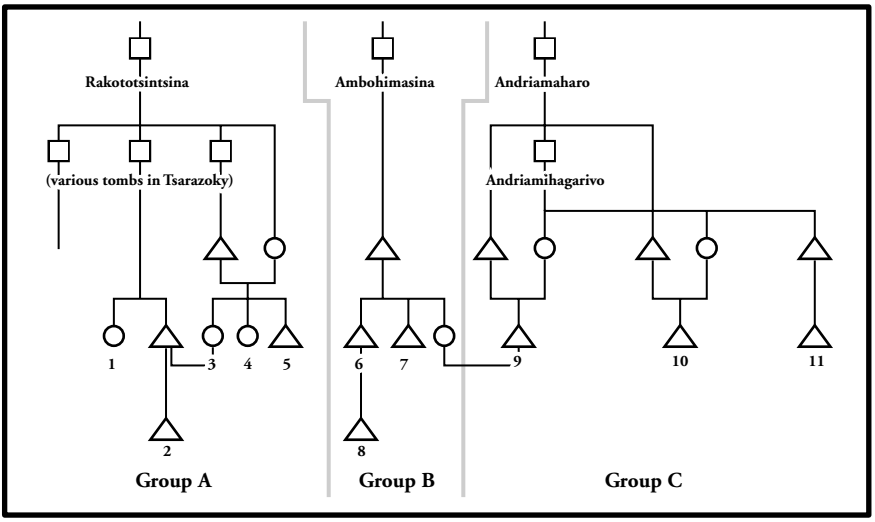
11.1. Ratsizafy's marriage

most regularly to work for him in Morafeno, but Ratsizafy helped them in all sorts of other ways: he provided meals, advice, small gifts of money, bailed them out of financial scrapes, helped with the education of their children. Nor did he expect very much in return, except for loyalty. It was altogether in his interest to have a devoted following amongst the *andriana*. It must also have been particularly personally satisfying, for a man who had spent so much of his early childhood living in exactly this sort of relation with his *andriana* patron from Anosy.[9] From Razanajohary's perspective, the advantages were self-evident: she was perhaps the only woman in Belanitra whose grown children were all still there.

Figure 11.1 represents a very simplified genealogy of the two families. Rakoto died in 1920; his two sons had both died shortly before I arrived, but when I asked who were Belanitra's real *Ray amandreny*, their names were always the first that would come to people's minds.[10] During the last years of their lives, both were said to have become regular visitors at Ratsizafy's: clients, even political allies.[11]

The people represented in diagram 11.1, then, were for the most part willing to accept Ratsizafy from the start. Most other families that made up Belanitra were, apparently, much more guarded on this issue.

When people described social groups, they generally talked about their tombs. By this logic, Belanitra was made up of three major ancestries (figure



11.2. Belanitra families

11.2). Ratsizafy's allies (#1–5) all ultimately traced back to the tomb of Rakototsintsina, a large stone-faced tomb located just outside the walled precinct of Antsahasoa, built in 1878.[12] No one was quite sure how this tomb fit into the overall hierarchy of the deme, but most described its descendants as "simple people," not having much to do with the great ruling families of *tampontanana*. The second (#6–8), trace to a tomb at Ambohimasina, along the abandoned ridge that lies at the northern fringe of the deme. It was not entirely clear how they fit into the overall hierarchy either, but (like Irina's family in Antanety, whose tombs were also on this ridge) they saw themselves as somewhat higher in status.

The third (#9–11) group, referred to as "People from Antsahasoa," are all, in one way or another, descendants of Andriamaharo.

The reader will by now be familiar with the figure of Andriamaharo: wealthiest and most important man of Betafo in the 1840s, founder of its church. Antsahasoa was abandoned around 1900, and most of his descendants eventually moved out to newly opened lands out west. However, the three families that did remain in Betafo's territory that did regularly make use of the ancient tombs located within the walls of Antsahasoa were all in Belanitra: most notable among them Rajaona, the *President Fokontany* (#9), and Solofo, the impoverished smith and reputed witch-catcher (#10). Rajaona

was considered the local "owner" of the old earthen tomb of Andriamaharo, Solofo, of the huge stone tomb of his son Andriamihagarivo, located directly to its south.[13]

These ties had an enormous effect on what sort of people Rajaona and Solofo—both men of decidedly modest means—took themselves to be. Antsahasoa itself is an empty compound, its ruined houses overgrown with grass and eucalyptus trees. Normally, its proprietors didn't even set foot there—perhaps they occasionally trimmed some wood for charcoal-making but certainly they never grew anything there. But every few years, people who normally lived in other parts of Madagascar would converge on it, open its tombs, recount the memories of its most distant ancestors while touching the remnants of their bodies. Rajaona and Solofo were the local guardians over those memories—which, however ambivalent, however much they even partook of a certain terrifying violence, were also guarantors of status, placing them at the very center of a history still valued by men and women in Antananarivo and Mahasolo—many of them far wealthier and more influential than they.

Did the Antasahasoa people actually preserve a memory that their ancestor had once owned Ratsizafy's? I would love to know, but even if they did, it was hardly the sort of thing they would have told outsiders. Certainly, everyone had heard the story of how Andriamaharo had thrown Rainitamaina in the pigsty, and how his rice was cursed for seven years, how Andriamaharo's descendants had themselves been cursed.[14] Hardly surprising then that Andriamaharo's descendants were from the beginning utterly unwilling to accept Ratsizafy's marriage, and his newfound, grandiose pretentions. Before long, they had managed to bring the Ambohimasina people—who at first had wavered—over to their camp.[15]

The conflict, then, did come down largely to a difference over history. At first, though, it had to remain somewhat covert.

When I talked to Razanajohary's children by her first husband, for instance, they would always dutifully affirm Rainitamaina's noble status. What was the reason, I once asked Rasata, for his quarrel with the Andrianamboninolona? He paused, then smiled: "He wasn't willing to be made a slave." He said it accompanied by an eager, smiling glance at a descendant of Rainitamaina who happened to be sitting on the street next to him at the time, a little like a student pleased to have remembered the correct answer during a surprise quiz. But still, he seemed to me not entirely insincere. At the same time, others, like the descendants of Andriamaharo, kept their own council.

They might not have said anything against him, in front of others, but neither were they willing to say much else. There were no open arguments, but exchanges between neighbors became more and more likely to contain uncomfortable silences. Many of Ratsizafy's clients began to frequent other astrologers; many even stopped taking their children to him when they were sick. The *andriana* of Anosy, a village of five or six households to the south of Belanitra, had always shunned Ratsizafy and relied on Dada Leva.[16] Many from Belanitra began to follow suit. Dada Leva—who was either unintimidated by Ratsizafy's powers or had to pretend, for reasons of professional image, that he was—was willing to openly declare that Ratsizafy's claims were entirely spurious, that his ancestor was nothing but a thieving slave.

Within the territory of Betafo, covert stories circulated. While few seemed willing to challenge Ratsizafy's stories about the distant past, there was a constant struggle over who could impose a narrative structure on events, which also meant, who could determine their moral significance. Irina's family from Antanety—who had their own hail charm, and came closest to being declared rivals of Ratsizafy—seemed most conspicuous in wanting to take this role. They might not have given me an argument when I told them Ratsizafy's version of his ancestor's quarrel with the *andriana*, but they did insist that his marriage to Razanajohary had been the result of witchcraft. Rakotovazaha, the woman's former husband, had been ill. When he and his wife went to Ratsizafy, Ratsizafy gave him poison, and slipped his wife love medicine. How else would such a thing have happened except through medicine?

The problem with this interpretation was that it did not explain how the Ingahibe could have gotten away with it. The woman who first told it to me herself went on, not ten minutes later, to insist that anyone, male or female, who uses love medicine to seduce an *andriana* will always be die because of it, and most likely in some terrible way, and almost certainly, leave no descendants to remember them. But there was Ratsizafy, living to a ripe old age, with two perfectly healthy male offspring. As a genre, stories of transgression were always also stories of punishment; the proof, one might say, was in the comeuppance. Until the culprit had experienced some unexpected disaster, or at least could be said to have done so, the suggestion of wrongdoing was a mere potential, an accusation awaiting evidence. The Malagasy language is rich in terms for people who make false accusations; it was, as in most places, considered a distinctly ugly thing to do. Most people, whatever they thought

of Ratsizafy, would be reluctant to suggest—in any company—that anyone they knew would be capable of such extreme depravity without some kind of evidence.[17]

Of course, Ratsizafy was himself, as a curer, in the best position to establish narratives about others' hidden misdeeds or malicious intentions—for those who came to him. Over the years since his marriage, I was told, he had been able to largely reshape allegiances within the community of Belanitra by manipulating where its households got their water: sowing such suspicions between households that his supporters ultimately abandoned their old spring and began getting their drinking water each morning from the spring at the head of the valley between Belanitra and Morafeno, periodically creating new suspicions and intrigue by encouraging individuals to yet more distant springs . . .

At the same time, other curers—first and foremost Dada Leva—played the same game with his opponents. All such curer's stories had a certain hypothetical air to them—in part because people would often have to go to several curers in a row for the same condition, and thus have often heard a whole series of different possible explanations for its origins. Almost all of this speculation was covert, and unavailable to me. But there was one that I did happen to hear about, rather by coincidence. One day I was chatting with a Zanadrano in Arivonimamo who, when I mentioned I was doing research in Betafo, remarked that he had once treated a boy from Belanitra who had been afflicted with *ambalavelona;* someone had caused him to develop dangerous fevers by afflicting him with a malicious ghost. A delegation of six or seven people had brought him in. The medium invoked his spirits, and soon determined that it was Ratsizafy who had done it. As soon as he revealed the culprit's name, he said, they immediately started asking him if there wasn't some way to cast the illness back on him, or even, take revenge by afflicting him with something worse. "Of course I told them that I couldn't. The spirits do not allow their powers to be used to do others harm. But they were offered me all sorts of money if I would."

Do You Want to Be Rich?

During the 1970s, as the tombs were built and renewed at Ambohitrimaninana, the demographic tide also swung increasingly in the favor of the *mainty*. Fewer and fewer *andriana* managed to keep their children from leaving the ancestral

territory, more and more *mainty* families did. By the late '80s, *andriana* made up only a slender majority of the population in the eastern *fokontany* of Betafo.

Much of it had to do with the economic crisis that began in the mid-70s, and the continual decline of standards of living. Imports and manufactured goods became infinitely more expensive; everyone needed more and more ways of getting money to be able to maintain even the most minimal standards: to keep themselves in candles, cooking oil, occasional new clothes, notebooks for their children. Black people, all too familiar with the world of wage labor, were in a far better position to adapt. Most were also more familiar with practical techniques of commerce. In Betafo, for instance, many *andriana* farmers reacted to the crunch by taking up blacksmithing. Ironwork was a traditional *andriana* occupation, every village had at least one two men who already knew how to do it, and knives, spades, and other implements were marketable commodities. The results were almost always disastrous. It was the merchants who supplied the metal, and then disposed of the products, who really made money on the deal; the smiths just barely made a profit, and the labor was so time-consuming that usually they ended up neglecting their own fields, which left them even more dependent on the market, since they had to buy more food. At the same time, while there were a few black people in Betafo who dabbled in metalworking, a much larger number went into the business end, becoming part-time ironmongers, which proved a far more effective way of supplementing income.

It was probably in 1970s and '80s, as white people became fewer and black ones wealthier, that most *andriana* developed the theory that they were being visited by divine punishment for their misdeeds. As always, there was more than one way to talk about it. On the one hand, a disaster was always the proof of wrongdoing. On the other, vast success was usually evidence for the manipulation of medicine, or other immoral practices. Ratsizafy's wealth, and his increasing fame outside of Betafo, was an obvious case in point. The more his fame increased, the more he could be seen as drawing on covert networks of money and influence that were almost by definition tainted and corrupt.

By the time I knew him, Ratsizafy was known as a curer as far away as the capital. His son Pano proudly informed me he would often get referrals from doctors in urban hospitals, whenever they concluded their patients were suffering from Malagasy ailments, beyond the range of Western medicine. If one dropped by his house, one was likely to meet men in military uniforms, women in stylish French apparel with leather jackets and silver cigarette cases,

the sort of people one would never otherwise see descend into the countryside; they always brought the traditional offering of rum, but also, substantial sums of money. All sorts of cars began to be spotted making their way up the pock-marked road that lead north from Arivonimamo, a road so rarely traveled by automobiles that one's passage was almost automatically a subject for widespread speculation and gossip. But the most celebrated visitor—and he rapidly became one of Ratsizafy's most frequent visitors—was a man from Arivonimamo named Manambe.

Manambe, everybody knew. He was the richest man in Arivonimamo. By the mid-80s, he was also a regular client of the Ingahibe. He had first come to Morafeno because of the illness of one of his children; before long, he was a devoted follower, never entering into a major new venture without consulting Ratsizafy first, buying all sorts of medicine from him. Each time Manambe bought another car or van, he would have it driven up to Morafeno, into the yard of Ratsizafy's great white house, where the old man and his sons would sprinkle it with water that had been mixed with the scrapings from various bits of medicinal wood to ward against accidents. Manambe was among those who held extensions of Ratsizafy's hail charm, Dry Rock; each year, on the new moon of the month *Alakaosy*, he would appear at the rituals to *manasina* it held at Ambohitrimaninana, and contribute his share of money to buy the sacrificial sheep.

Now, I actually saw Manambe quite a lot when I was living in Arivonimamo. About fifty years old, he always dressed in a simple Malabary, a gruff, square-shaped person with the abrupt, perfunctory air of someone used to making instant judgments.[18] He affected an air of rustic simplicity, shunning the exterior trappings of wealth. But men like that didn't need to show off. His wealth was legendary. Everyone knew about his endless herds of cattle at pasture in the meadowlands out west, his vast fleet of cars, his innumerable houses. And there was a broad consensus, too, as to how he had come by his money. He had stolen it. How else could anyone possibly become so rich? Or, to be more precise, there was something that had stolen it for him. As almost everyone in Arivonimamo could could tell you: he had a *Kalanoro*.

Kalanoro are creatures similar to humans; usually, they were represented as tiny women with long flowing hair. Some said they are a kind of *Vazimba*, others, that they were living creatures that become *Vazimba* when they die. Still others treated them as yet another variety of *lolo*.[19] Like *Vazimba*, they could form relationships with humans. They were however always said to be

demanding and difficult to keep; most of all, they imposed all sorts of dietary restrictions.[20]

I first heard Manambe's story from Rakoto, the astrologer, Ratsizafy's nephew from Morafeno.

> Rakoto: Now, *Kalanoro* are similar to . . . they're like what you'd call *Vazimba* They're a kind of *Vazimba*. *Vazimba* exist; they are living people just like us, except that they can't be seen by the eye. And they won't eat cooked things. Raw fish, raw chicken, that's what it's the nature of *Kalanoro* to eat.
>
> They won't reveal themselves in the open; when they walk abroad, even if they do it at high noon and walk up to the marketplace, they will be surrounded by a darkness.
>
> Parson: Is that so?
>
> Rakoto: *Kalanoro* are like a second God. They resemble other creatures that God fashioned except that God gave them a special gift; he gave them a power [*fahaizana*] like unto his own. They are genuinely close to God. Because they can just enter a house in the night, and there won't be any sign of a break-in: no door opened, no wall broken in. That's how they enter, then they leave in the same way.

Take the example of Manambe, he explained. In the beginning, he was a poor man, making his living driving an ox cart back and forth between Arivonimamo and Amboanana. Then one day, the spirits just happened to take a fancy to him. They pressed down on him, spoke to him on the road, and they offered him a deal: if he were to agree to abstain from the foods they hated—not to eat chicken, not to eat cooked fish, not to eat pork—for ten years, and to keep the arrangement an absolute secret from everyone else, even his wife, then during that time they would give him three bushels full of money. If at any time he broke the agreement, they would kill him.

Manambe kept to his agreement, and as a result, they showered money on him. They provided him with a box of money that never seemed to run out.

> . . . they brought money, brought cows, brought money, brought cows: Manambe no longer had any idea what to think. The only work he had to do was buying cars, buying cattle fattening at pasture—by now he has more than four thousand cows at pasture, and sixty-seven automobiles.
>
> Then, when about ten years had passed . . . "Your appointed time on earth," they said, "has come. Now you will die, and join us."
>
> That was when Manambe came to his senses and built that tomb of his. Once again he inspected his money: it still had not run out. So not only did he build that tomb, he also did this: he approached *mpomasy* (and, you know, he employs very large numbers of *mpomasy*). "I'm about to be taken away by those *Kalanoro*," he said, "so . . . work things out so I'm not with them any more. Because if I am with them," he said, "they'll take me off to die. But my possessions are very numerous."

Whereupon, Rakoto explained, the astrologers and other *mpomasy* drew on all of their skills and knowledge, and came upon a plan. They placed magical protection of every sort on him and all his possessions, and then told him to break every taboo at once. The creature reacted with fury but in the end, there was nothing it could do.

Kalanoro, then, were very like *Vazimba*. They were invisible, and somewhat undefinable.[21] As with *Vazimba*, the stories were dominated by themes of desire and renunciation: *Kalanoro* offer untold wealth, but only if one renounce many of the simplest pleasures—like meat—that wealth would ordinarily provide. The one thing everyone remarked about Manambe, for example, was that he rarely ate outside his own house, and never slept away from it: he never even made an overnight trip on business. A *Kalanoro* will not allow you to sleep away from it. Rakoto suggested in fact the *Kalanoro* was a woman—one occasionally glimpsed her in the house, he said, a tiny woman with long flowing hair—and refused to let him spend a single night away.[22]

Rakoto's version was, as usual, more than a little irresponsible and self-serving. He mainly seemed interested in making it a kind of advertisement for his trade—no one else claimed that Manambe was actually free of the *Kalanoro*. This sort of casual defiance of any realistic limits seemed to be his own personal signature in storytelling: as in his version of the Rainitamaina story, he alone insisted one could prevail totally, no matter what the obstacle, if only one had sufficient knowledge of medicine. It was all the more weighted because, as everyone knew, the chief *mpomasy* in Manambe's employ was Rakoto's own uncle Ratsizafy.

One afternoon in August I was visiting *tampon-tanana* and Miadana's neighbor Sely appeared, looking like he had just slugged down at least a bottle or two of Malagasy rum. He had just paid off the last of his debts to a notorious loan shark, and had been celebrating. He came over to tell us the good news, and we ended up spending almost an hour in a long, meandering conversation that (not surprisingly) tended to center on the theme of money. Miadana had long been telling me that Sely knew all sorts of things about medicine and related subjects, having once been a curer himself, but he was usually withdrawn and nervous and difficult to talk to. Miadana was quick to take advantage of the situation. Eventually the topic shifted to Manambe. Is it true that he has a *Kalanoro?* Sely replied that it most certainly was. It steals for him.

> Sely: You know Manambe's house? On the top floor—up there is where the *Kalanoro* lives. And even if it's money in the bank, no matter how many millions,

or money with the Pakistani merchants, or the Chinese, it's just "Pay up please!" however many millions.
MIADANA: But it doesn't come out during the day?
SELY: Just at night.
MIADANA: And it doesn't eat rice?
SELY: Just crabs, and raw fish.
MIADANA: And it can't be seen by his wife and children?
SELY: No, no, no, no! That's *fady!*
MIADANA: Also, if someone has just died, its owner can't be in the presence of the corpse. Isn't that right?
SELY: A *Kalanoro* will not go to a place where there's a corpse. But its owner can.
MIADANA: But why not?
SELY: [as if to an idiot] It's a *ghost-thing!*
MIADANA: Oh, that's true.

It was a notorious thing that spirits avoided anything that smacked of decomposition. (Rakoto had in fact pointed to the fact that Manambe had recently built himself a tomb as proof that he was no longer in the sway of his *Kalanoro*.)

Sely's speech was slurred, at times he seemed a bit wobbly on his feet, but it was true: he did seem to know all sorts of things. Miadana and Claude were happily taking the opportunity to go through every rumor they had heard about the nature of *Kalanoro*. "What I've always wondered was how one comes by one," said Miadana. "Does it come to you all of its own accord, or do you have to somehow call it?"

"Well, in the case of Manambe, that one I know about." He had been wandering about in empty country in the province of Tafiketsa, way out west, and he saw it, and just grabbed it and stuck it in his coat.

SELY: Just went right up to him, and he just wrapped it right up. Then he took it straight to the top floor of his house.
Then, "What do you desire? Do you want to be rich?"
"Yeah, rich."
"Because even if it's money in the bank, then we can get it. Are you married?" "Yes, I'm married."
"If you're married, then this thing will definitely have some difficult taboos . . ."

He went on to list them: pork, chicken, fish, all sorts of onions . . .

"That's true," said Miadana, "about the pork. Because one day he walked into the *hotely* where I was eating lunch, and they had pork, but he didn't touch it. He ordered beans instead. I was really amazed, because he's such a wealthy man."

Claude changed the subject slightly: "But you know, he and Ratsizafy, they're like *that*."

"I've heard about that," I said. "But why?"

Well, it must be something having to do with medicine, said Claude. If Manambe's going there, he must be getting some kind of medicine. Sely interrupted: actually, he said, Ratsizafy doesn't show off his real skills in Betafo. He just does astrology and curing, and of course he's very good at that, but what he's best at is medicine for making money. That he only does outside of his ancestral territory.

> Sely: One time Ratsizafy himself went up to me, saying: "Do you want to be rich, young man? Watch this." He took a thousand *ariary* bill to buy wares from the Chinese shops—this was in the big market in the capital. A thousand *ariary*, he said, I'll buy some cloth, he said, and I'll buy all sorts of other goods. I'll take this thousand *ariary* bill and give it to the merchants. Then I'll get all the goods I need, he said, and not only that, I'll get more and more change back from each one of them . . ."
>
> "You give me one thousand *ariary* to buy things," he said, "and I'll bring you back eleven thousand change."

The story brought on an eager look of recognition to Miadana's face. "Now that's really true," she hastened to explain to me, "because that's something that I've seen myself." She went on to describe an incident that happened to her many years before: a man had met her going out one morning to buy breakfast. She was carrying some small amount of money, 100 *ariary*, enough to buy some rice cakes and a cup of coffee. He said, "Give me the money, and I can get you all the food you want." He took the bill and went up to a coffee stand, gave the woman the hundred *ariary*; the woman gave him a cup of coffee and 500 *ariary* in change. He took the bill to the next stand, bought two loaves of French bread. The vendor took the money, gave him the two loaves, and handed him over a thousand. He went on to buy a glass of milk, strips of cured beef, and everything one would want for an luxurious breakfast, by which time he had accumulated several thousand in change. He gave her the food and her money back. "I'll teach you how to do it," he said, "if you sleep with me." She demurred.[23]

Sely, as we shall see, had reasons of his own to stand in awe of Ratsizafy's financial wizardry. But the way one the topic followed the other was itself revealing. Ratsizafy, after all, was having exactly the same power as the *Kalanoro*. He even uses the same words: "Do you want to be rich?" Even his mode of acquiring the riches was not especially different from that employed

by the *Kalanoro*: both took the money from wealthy foreign merchants, Chinese and Pakistani, without those merchants noticing that they were being had.

In a way, the parallel was more real than even Sely realized. Manambe did, apparently, observe some very unusual restrictions. At least, just about everyone I knew in Arivonimamo could testify to some peculiar incident about his hurrying home for no apparent reason, his refusing to eat with hosts because of something they were serving, his bizarre reluctance to attend some funeral—or if not, they had heard of innumerable examples of this sort of thing. This was the reason so many were willing to believe he really did have a spirit in his house. In the absence of a *Kalanoro*, however, such behavior was usually a token of the presence of medicine. Medicine always had its *fady*. And Ratsizafy, did, indeed, provide Manambe with his medicine. It was he—to paraphrase Rakoto—who provided the protection on his money and his cattle, along with the medicine that protected his cars from accidents and his crops from hail. And Ratsizafy was, as we have seen, unusually fond of imposing harsh taboos.

Chantal and I did talk to Ratsizafy once about his friend. He actually brought up the subject himself, when talking about some of the wealthier families of Arivonimamo. "Rich people there are plenty," he said, "but there's no one like Manambe. And he's not at a bit stuck up!"

Ratsizafy, interestingly enough, was the only person I met who outright denied Manambe had a *Kalanoro*. ("A lie!" he said.) Though he also went on to give away the show (in my opinion) by immediately launching into an entirely unique explanation of *Kalanoro*. Anyway, he said, these are very moral creatures. They're mainly from the east coast, you know. But they certainly don't enable their human companions to steal—no, quite the opposite. They provide sage advice and encourage honesty and integrity in those they counsel. If their charges often prospered, it was only because they soon gained such a reputation for honesty and fair dealing that everyone would know it was safe to do business with them.

"But how did he become so very rich?"

A tiny look of exasperation passed over Ratsizafy's face, then he drew back and began to patiently set forth the principles of commerce. Look, you get yourself a little money, he said. You invest it. You buy low. Sell high. Ten cows become twenty; twenty get you fifty. You spot a good deal on a car, sell

half the cows to buy it, then rent out the car to the local taxi cooperative. Use the proceeds to buy more cows. Manambe himself started out as a simple butcher, he used to sell meat in some rural marketplace down in Amboanana. But he was very good at it. He saved money, he invested . . .

All this was no doubt true. But it also seems to me that Manambe's behavior—which had nearly everyone utterly convinced he had a *Kalanoro*—might definitely have played a part in achieving this success. Particularly for a businessman who was operating in a part of the country in which, increasingly, police and courts had no interest in enforcing contracts—or even protecting private property—having everyone convinced one is operating with the assistance of an invisible creature of almost unimaginable power is extremely helpful in ensuring others will keep their contractual obligations. In a way, he was playing the same sort of game of manipulating impressions that I described in chapter 7, only on a larger scale.

Ratsizafy, then, was not entirely off the mark when he said that *Kalanoro* serve as general-purpose advisors to their charges, guiding them on how to adopt a style of conduct that will give them the kind of reputation that will make it easier for them to advance in life—only, it was not chiefly by appearing moral but by playing with the possibility one might not be; and the part of the *Kalanoro*, of course, was played by Ratsizafy himself.[24]

Bad Ordeal

Ratsizafy, then, was engaged in a project of legitimation. One mark it was working, of the acceptance for Betafo's *mainty* was Augustin's election to the office of *President Fokontany* in 1975, at the tender age of thirty. It was the first time an *olona mainty* had been elected president, and it happened despite the fact that *andriana* were still a clear majority.

National politics played a large part in Augustin's election. The previous president, Raveloson from Belanitra, had been a member of the AKFM, an officially Soviet-line party that was a bastion of the Merina Protestant elite. The AKFM had been one of the few, barely tolerated, opposition parties in the years of the pro-French Tsiranana regime (1960–1972). When that regime was overthrown in an urban uprising in 1972, and replaced by a largely Merina military government, AKFM candidates took over local offices all over rural Imerina. In 1975, Didier Ratsiraka, an officer originally from the

east coast, seized power and formed his own party, AREMA (*Avant Garde de la Revolution Malgache*), amidst much talk of social revolution. It was at this moment that Augustin stood for office, as a supporter of the new president. As an energetic young man, and a descendant of the local dispossessed, he seemed ideal for the new era. As the son of one of Betafo's wealthiest residents[25] he also had the resources to devote himself full time to the job.

As it turned out, though—much to the disappointment of students like Armand, who was in high school at the time, and no doubt Augustin himself—revolutionary transformation was not forthcoming. Not that most voters had really been expecting it. In local elections at least, rural voters tend to vote for whoever is put up by the ruling party, hoping it will at least mean new books or money for the local school, help in repairing roads, maybe even some agricultural development loans.[26] Ratsiraka's regime provided little. In rural areas, state funds increasingly dried up, even for party stalwarts. While Augustin was elected again for another four-year term in 1979, by then, it was largely because of his obvious competence and willingness to diligently carry out even the most tiresome paperwork—combined with the unanimous support by his fellow *mainty*, and finally, perhaps, the fact that, since he was so young, voters felt that it would be easy to ignore him if he did try to get them to do anything they didn't want to do.[27]

As soon as it became clear that revolutionary noises were not going to be translated into policies, Augustin began to reposition himself, quickly and effectively. He forged good relations with wealthy absentees like Rahoby, Elizabeth, and Esther, gradually becoming unofficial caretaker for their tombs. On a local level, he tried to compensate for his youth by identifying his own authority, as much as possible, with Ratsizafy's.

Of course, Ratsizafy's own authority was, to a certain extent, still under construction at this time. It was during the early years of Augustin's tenure that the Ingahibe built his great tomb at Ambohitrimaninana, and began holding extravagant *famadihana* there almost every year. Augustin himself had built a fine tomb there only a year or two before. It was Augustin who was most insistent about representing Rainitamaina as the common ancestor of all Betafo's *mainty*. He also did his best to back up broader claims, for instance, to play up the importance of Ratsizafy's medicine in creating a moral community among everyone, white and black, who relied on it for protection. When Pano told me his father's medicine made them the moral guarantors of the community, allowing them to punish evil-doers by depriving them of rice,

he made a point of explaining that in this matter, his family always worked closely with Augustin, the *President Fokontany*.[28]

How Betafo was to be defined, as a moral community, became a more and more pressing issue in the early '80s—not just because of tensions between black and white, but because of the collapse of state authority. All over Imerina, people were getting poorer, just as the government was in most areas abandoning any interest in protecting private property. All over Imerina, the result was the same: an upsurge in crop theft, burglary, cattle-rustling, in more distant areas, even organized banditry.

The extent of the problem varied considerably from place to place. Many communities, as we have seen, boasted that they were almost entirely immune from theft; the terrible powers of their ancestors or stones of imprecation frightened thieves away. Everywhere, there was a revival of "Malagasy" forms of justice and local organization, of which one of the most visible manifestations was the widespread revival of the practice of holding collective ordeals. In Arivonimamo people spoke of a number of huge ceremonies carried out in 1981 and 1982 which thousands of people attended: one at the foot of Mount Ambohipanompo to the east of town, another to its south at Maharemana, just next to the former national airport.

In Betafo, the first such ordeal was held in 1982—mainly on the initiative of the *President Fokontany*. For years Betafo had been plagued by theft. Covert tensions—and the dramatically different economic fortunes of poor *andriana* and local *mainty*—created a climate in which petty thievery had become a constant; people were saying Betafo was developing a reputation as a community of thieves. It was becoming a matter of considerable embarrassment. Holding a collective ordeal was in a way the ideal response, because it not only addressed the problem, but served to reinforce the notion of a unified Betafo, even to construct a new idiom in which to define the community.

The reader will recall how in chapter 3, I described two different forms of negative authority. One was founded on a sense of common ancestry: in this, ancestors continue to guarantee the moral solidarity of their descendants, largely by threatening them with violent retribution. The other is founded on a principle of agreement that binds together a group of people who may not share the same ancestry, but who all live together in one place. In practice, the second often converged with the first, because the most common way to create such a state of mutual agreement was by creating some overarching force of violence that could play the same role as ancestors. Hence, two unrelated

people might perform a ritual of *fatidra,* or blood brotherhood, which was indeed a kind of agreement, but one in which those making it called on the power of the agreement itself ("Lord Fatidra") to punish them with terrible disasters, should they fail to live up to their newfound obligations. Communities were in a sense doing exactly the same thing when they assembled to dedicate a stone of imprecations: they would swear oaths, and afterward call on the power constituted by their former agreement to destroy those who transgressed.

When ordeals were actually carried out, though, it was, so far as I could make out, never the spirit of any agreement that was called on to effect the punishment, but always ancestors. Occasionally, near a very famous tomb, or in communities where everyone was of the same descent, one might call on a specific ancestor: when the descendants of Andrianetivola held their ordeal at the foot of Mount Ambohipanompo in 1981, for instance, they invoked "God, Andrianetivola, and the ancestors." More often, though, it was just "the ancestors" as a generic collectivity.

Ritual forms could be more, or less, exclusive. If one took dust from an ancestral tomb and mixed it in gold-water, one was calling on the power of a specific ancestor. The more common way of conducting an ordeal, having everyone eat of a piece of calf 's liver, was explicitly modeled on the ritual of blood brotherhood and as such, emphasized the degree to which such ordeals could bring people of different ancestries together. The ordeal carried out in Betafo, in 1982 took the latter form.

It was held in March, a few days before the beginning of the harvest. The immediate occasion was the theft of rice. Someone (or more likely, several people) had snuck down to the valley to the west of the village during the night, entered a field belonging to Armand's younger brother, Big Fredy, and harvested a large part of its rice. No one was entirely sure if the culprits were actually from Betafo, but the crime was the last of a rash that people had been complaining about for months, and it was decided that it would be the right time for an act of communal purification. Augustin and Ratsizafy were, it would seem, the prime movers behind the initiative, but it is hard to say for sure, because there was a strong feeling that such acts should arise from the spontaneous *firaisan-kina* or "unity of purpose" of the community—to say it was organized by the initiative of certain individuals would be to say there was something inappropriate about the matter, and no one I spoke to seemed to feel that holding it was not a good idea. Anyway, the other important figures of

Betafo, such as Sely and Ingahirainy, all enthusiastically took part. Augustin had the entire population of the fokontany above the age of ten—including people who owned land in Betafo but were currently living in the town of Arivonimamo—assemble before the standing stone that stood to the west of Betafo's church. A table was set up over the stone, an ox's liver roasted and laid out on it; after Augustin had performed the actual imprecations, calling on the ancestors to destroy the guilty, the meat was chopped into tiny portions, and everyone walked up in turn and ate a piece.

Here is how Miadana remembered the words Augustin pronounced on this occasion, or anyway her slightly breathless parody of them:

> Miadana: You, oh ancestors, are before us, because among us, the offspring of Betafo, many are the thieves, many the pilferers here among us. Our rice is lost, our (whatever) is lost; yet everyone says it wasn't they who stole it. Therefore we come here before you at the sacred stone [*vato masina*]; so this: here we all are together to make imprecations, together to eat of this meat. Because we are one blood, one descent, though our origins are different we now all live together. So this: if any have stolen, let them be cut apart like this meat. If there are any who have turned their back on what they have agreed to, turned around to do evil, then whoever eats who has done evil, let it make their bellies sick . . . so that they die, and their bodies then be lost.

The phrasing goes far to emphasize the creation of community, playing up both the rhetoric of agreement and that of common descent, even to the point of contradiction. The use of "one blood" here, incidentally, is not the same as "one descent": it is a direct invocation of the logic of blood-brotherhood, where the meat to be eaten would actually contain a mixture of blood drawn from both of the parties.

It might be worthwhile to pause a moment to consider the significance of ordeals, particularly in the light of everything I had to say in chapter 7 about the relative absence, in rural Imerina, of an explicitly political sphere. What was most of all lacking was a sense of game-like arenas: spaces circled off with the understanding that any actions carried out within them are prone to be more broadly represented or reported. Normally, one expects politics to involve contests, or anyway, dramatic actions meant to generate stories, but which will also result in outcomes or decisions that will have broader social effects, which make some kind of difference in other people's lives.

Insofar as there was any formally recognized institution (or anyway, any one not identified with the state) that played this sort of role, it was judicial ones, ranging from *fokon'olona* meetings to ordeals. This might be considered

a logical extension of the principle of negative authority: while it was not appropriate for those in authority to initiate projects of action, it was legitimate to take action in response to others'. What's more, these were events that were all about creating narratives.

I have already suggested that claims of wrongdoing are hard to take seriously without some disaster to appeal to as evidence. One might see an ordeal in this light as a way of creating a kind of framing mechanism; if narratives of wrongdoing tend to take the form of stories of transgression and retribution, the purpose of a collective ordeal is to lay out such a narrative field by singling out a specific transgression, then declaring that whatever disaster next befalls someone should be interpreted as retribution for it. In this one can draw a sharp distinction between trials and ordeals. A trial (and for present purposes *fokon'olona* meetings may be considered a variety of trial) is meant to establish a definitive narrative, to determine guilt or innocence, so that one can then, if necessary, mete out retribution.[29] An ordeal is also about establishing a canonical narrative, but instead of the outcome being determined by the story, here it is the other way around. One begins by laying out the field and producing a definitive outcome—by feeding the suspects *tangena* and three pieces of chicken skin, for instance, and then seeing if they can vomit them all up, or by giving poison to a dog. The nature of the outcome then determines the story: if the suspect dies, then clearly it was he who stole the rice.

In the case of a poison ordeal, of course, the result was known immediately; while the beginning of the story was yet to be determined, the ritual determined the moment of closure, where the story would definitely end. In collective *fitsitsihina,* both ends extended beyond the actual field of the public event; the ritual did act as a narrative framing device in that it was understood that the next disaster that occured was to be considered proof of guilt, but there is no authoritative mechanism for determining which disaster was to be interpreted this way. If, for instance, the next person who died after the 1982 ordeal had been a venerable old woman whose health had been shaky for years, few would have considered the possibility she had stolen Big Fredy's rice; if it had been a younger man who died of pneumonia, most would have considered him the culprit; if a younger man was hit by a car, there would be no doubt in anybody's mind. Actually in this case no one was willing to tell me who they thought had done it—though this was largely because of a feeling that one shouldn't speak badly of the dead. Several people assured me that

one man did fall ill and die not too long afterward, and a fairly young man to boot. Some hinted he was an *andriana* from Belanitra, but I really do not know for sure.

The ordeal, however, certainly did not put an end to communal tensions—or endemic thievery. During the *Fokontany* elections of 1983, tensions even began to emerge into the open. This was a genuinely contested election, the first of several, and for this reason still remembered with some embarassment. Two clear voting blocs emerged. People described them, euphemistically, as "north" and "south." "North" meant primarily Andrianony, united with Morafeno, and Ratsizafy's allies in Belanitra. Their candidate was Augustin. "South" meant the *andriana* of Belanitra, Anosy, and nearby hamlets, united behind a man named Andre. Andre was a middle-aged smith, a nephew of the old *notable* who had been one of the last *andriana* inhabitants of Andrianony; he himself lived in a hamlet he had founded immediately across the fields from Andrianony, to the northeast. Andre won.

It was a sign of the growing emptiness of official institutions, however, that Augustin could simply ignore the results. Now officially reduced to vice president, he continued acting almost exactly as he had before: keeping an eye out for transgressors against Ratsizafy's *fady*, helping to resolve minor disputes, looking after school supplies and encouraging attendance. It helped that Andre had no real interest in the job. Most of the time he wasn't farming he was working the forge behind his house, making shovels. Almost everyone in Betafo had some story about having to trudge across the fields to his house in search of some form, or get him to sign some document—since official paperwork was about the only function he actually was expected to fulfill—only to wait for what seemed like hours as he hammered away, ingot between the tongs; even when you did get his attention, half the time he'd lie and claim he didn't have the papers, just to get rid of you.

One token of Andre's ineffectiveness is that no one even mentioned his playing any role in the events that lead up to the second ordeal held in Betafo, the one carried out in 1987.

That ordeal was also carried out in summer, in early February. Again the occasion was a theft of rice. January and February are months of scarcity, only the very most prosperous farmers still had any rice left over from the previous year's harvest; as a result, the price of rice becomes very high. In Betafo, the only households which had that great a surplus, at that time, were all *mainty*: Ratsizafy's in Morafeno, in Andrianony, Rabera's (Augustin's father), and that

of Norbert's father Ingahirainy. One morning, people woke up to discover that the storage pit where Ingahirainy keep his rice had been opened, and the entire contents removed. Ingahirainy was extremely angry and upset. As local elder, he had been complaining for years about the endless thievery, and the bad name Betafo had been getting as a result. But this was an unprecedented crime: so much rice had been carried away that the thieves would have had to have brought an ox cart and several men to load it. That afternoon the *fokon'olona* assembled: the whole population of Andrianony, Avarakady, Sely from *tampon-tanana*,[30] Rainibe's family (and presumably Andre). Discussion centered on trying to reconstruct the crime, as well as the movements of everyone who had been out of town that morning, to see who did, and who did not, have a plausible alibi. The man who came under the heaviest suspicion was a certain Rapiera, Norbert's eldest son by his first marriage, Ingahirainy's grandson.[31] Rapiera was twenty years old, but, disowned by his father, he had been forced to support himself by his wits—it was Rapiera, in fact, who first took up the business Armand was later to get involved with: he would rent a truck and buying bananas on the East Coast, then distribute them to local vendors along the roads to the west of the capital. This meant he was only occasionally in Betafo; even when he was not away on business, he spent most of his time with his mother's family in Ambatomitsangana, several kilometers to the east. But he had passed through a few days before the crime.

Though no one would have directly said so, there was also no doubt a feeling that Rapiera would have had the most obvious personal motive. The year before, Ingahirainy had tried to give his grandsons rice fields, Norbert had prevented him. One could easily imagine the boy might feel hauling off some of Ingahirainy's rice was only taking what should have rightfully been his. It didn't help that Rapiera was widely known to have a contentious and explosive disposition, not at all unlike his father's. In fact, the two of them were hardly on speaking terms.

In Rapiera's absence, it was up to Norbert to account for his son's whereabouts. Norbert claimed not to have the slightest idea. He offered no defense of his son, and said he knew nothing about his business (this was, most likely, true). He implied that for all he knew, this business did not even exist. In fact, by the end of the meeting, he had reached the point of implying he thought his son was guilty, and—according to some accounts—even of saying that he had no intention of standing in the way of the *fokon'olona* no matter what

they saw fit to do with him. It was at this point Ingahirainy declared that the only way to resolve the issue was by holding an ordeal.

Considering the direction things were taking (and the realization that his own actions, however well-meaning, were partly responsible), this might well have seemed the best way to head off a complete disaster. Ingahirany was universally known to be a decent, even kindly man, but he was notoriously shy and unassertive, never entirely comfortable with playing the role of *Ray amandReny*. This was the only occasion I heard of in which he so vehemently took center stage. Only a collective ordeal, he said, could salvage Betafo's reputation; he would not agree unless one was immediately carried out.

Once the decision had been made, however, it was Ratsizafy, Augustin, and Sely who took over.

Ingahirainy offered to provide the money for the liver; Augustin was ready to set off immediately for the meat market in town. But Ratsizafy didn't think using a liver would be a very good idea. Considering how little people trusted each other, at this point, he doubted everyone would even be willing to eat it. "Some half-cooked piece of liver that everybody else has handled?"—that's what they would say. "How do I know where that liver's been?" Better, he said, to use gold-water—clean water, and the schoolteacher in Antanety had some gold jewelry we could put in it. Then mix it with earth taken from the two ancestral tombs.

Ratsizafy was the obvious authority on ritual matters, so in the end they followed his advice. But by choosing this form, he was making a very clear political statement. For one thing, by taking earth from just two tombs, he was saying Betafo was not composed of people of different ancestries, it was composed of people of just *two* different ancestries, that Rainitamaina and Andrianambololona between them encompassed the whole of the community. Doing so, then, was a way of echoing Augustin's claims that all of Betafo's *mainty* were, in some way or another, descendants of Rainitamaina (a claim Ratsizafy himself was never quite willing to state outright), by having Rainitamaina stand in the same relation to them, as a group, that Andrianambololona stood to the *andriana*.

But there was more. The act of mixing the two could also be taken as a creative gesture, a way of stating that it was *the act of combining them* that constituted the unity of the community. This would have obvious implications for Ratsizafy's own position. He had married an *andriana* woman, and as a result, he was the head of the one family in Betafo that could be said to be composed

equally of both. For this reason, it was surely significant that the man he sent to actually fetch the earth from Rainitamaina's tomb was an *andriana*: Rakotovoavy, his own wife's eldest son by her first husband, Rakotovazaha, one of his "fosterlings." It was as if to emphasize the fact that his family combined both sides.

But by carrying out this act in the context of an ordeal—a ritual intended to create an open-ended narrative framework in which any disaster which ensued could be interpreted as a token of ancestral judgment—he was taking a real risk. That was what laid him open to the catastrophe that followed.

I have already reproduced Miadana's account of the ordeal in chapter 1. That was the first account I heard of the affair; later I heard the same story, with surprisingly little variation, from at least a dozen others. But the most complete perhaps was also, mainly, Miadana's; this was during a conversation that took place two months later, during a visit by Claude's mother Elizabeth, after I knew a bit more about Betafo and its dramatis personae. It all began after Nivo was again complaining about the whirlwind[32] that had struck Betafo the year before, when Rainitamaina was accidentally exposed, ever so slightly, to the sun. The problem, she said, really went back to the ordeal of the previous year:

> Nivo: Look carefully. One time they did an ordeal here. The two of them, Andrianamboninolona and Rainitamaina, were put together. And wasn't there a disaster? What a disaster! It was that above all that had caused that whirlwind. [very angrily now] Because after that, none of the rice in the fields was left alive!
> Miadana: One time there was an ordeal here because of there being so many thieves. Ingahirainy's rice had been stolen. And Ingahirainy wouldn't agree; he said: "Then we'll have the whole population of Betafo put to the ordeal because they're all thieves, to a man! We're famous for it!"
> Claude: And they took earth from here, and earth from over there . . .
> Miadana: And added gold jewelry . . .
>
> We were in a hurry to go home to Arivonimamo at that time. . . . They came, and they called Ingahy Ratsizafy. And they called Sely, and they called Ingahirainy, and they had a bowl carried over there. They took that, and the schoolteacher came, the one from Antanety. She had some gold jewelry.
>
> So they took the water. And Ingahy Ratsizafy told Sely: "Go get some dust from Andrianamboninolona's tomb." And Rakotovoavy took earth from up north [at Ambohitrimaninana].
>
> We all waited there—the rain about to come. The rain was about to come, and we were waiting there to the west of the tomb. And the entire town arrived. "So where's the gold? Where's the gold?" (there at the *fokontany* office). "Where's the gold?—put it in here because we're having an ordeal, it has to be all ready because we're going to have an ordeal, and the thief will be struck down . . . struck down by the ancestors."

So they took the bowl and—combined it. And the schoolteacher took the jewelry, and put it all in. And Sely took the earth, and put that in the bowl. And then they put in water. It was all together.

And this: when it was all together, Ratsizafy started making these great imprecations: "You, oh ancestors from ancient times. You have all come here now, for here are all the descendants of Betafo, one totality. For our rice is being stolen. Our plows are being taken. Sometimes people pilfer other people's houses. Our chickens: lost.

"So if for instance something has been done, if for instance it is one of us who have done it, then let there be, like . . . a sanction. We are not going to just direct our imprecations at one person; it is by your grace that . . . if there is anyone among us who has really been stealing, then you detect them."

Like that.

The imprecations were finished. Then they drank the water—took the water and drank it all. Then they scattered. Everyone scattered and the ordeal broke up.

Claude: And then the rain came.

Miadana: And the rain really came, and . . .

Nivo [almost shouting] The rice in the fields all floated away!

Miadana: And this is what happened: it was Sely's rice, and Ingahy Ratsizafy's rice. But only theirs.

Ingahy Ratsizafy's rice ended up being gathered together over in Ambodivona. And Sely's rice was also swept down there, but nobody else's except his. Everyone else's rice just stayed where it was.

Chantal: And Ratsizafy's was okay?

Miadana: No, I said his floated away on the moving water . . . because it was rice that was almost ripe. The rainwater carried it all, all, all along, and they only gathered it together again at the dam. The same with the other one's . . .

Elizabeth: They were looking for trouble by doing that.

Miadana: And it was the same with the . . .

Chantal: So the two ancestors shouldn't have been combined like that?

Elizabeth: Combined inside one thing.

David: Because if the dust is combined . . .

Miadana: Then it's a catastrophe!

It was a small flash flood, or something very close to one [according to other accounts, interspersed with hail]. When people say that it struck particularly at Ratsizafy and Sely, and no one else, what they seem to mean is that it struck particularly at Berahaka, a stretch of fields directly to the north of Morafeno, and also to some adjoining fields owned or managed by Sely. Or anyway that only the rice from those fields was particularly hard hit.

No one who told the story bothered to say anything further about the stolen rice. The event became a commentary on Ratsizafy's act of mixing the two ancestors. By conducting the ceremony, he had created an issue around which people could actually say what they thought about his marriage.

Now, one of the things which made Ratsizafy's marriage different from previous *mainty-andriana* unions was the fact that it had yielded offspring. Previous marriages between descendants of Rainitamaina and those of Andrianambololona had always been infertile. Many pointed to this very fact as evidence of ancestral cursing.[33] Children made everything more difficult. To understand why, it helps to understand that throughout Madagascar, affines are thought of primarily as people who one's own descendants will someday consider ancestors. If my daughter marries X's son, it is their children and grandchildren who really unite me with X, because those children will be equally descended from the both of us (Rakoto 1971). In the nineteenth century, this was the reason marriages between status groups were forbidden. Any such union was referred to as "stealing other people's ancestors."[34] If a black person married an *andriana*, that black person's children would have *andriana* ancestors. A mere theft of rice was a relatively minor business in comparison.

As for the man who stole the rice: when I asked directly, most people would say somewhat uncomfortably that yes, the ordeal had indeed been effective; within a month or two, a man had been struck down. Perhaps the main reason for the discomfort was that it was not exactly through invisible means. In fact, the consensus was that it had indeed been Rapiera who had stolen the rice—or anyway that he had been behind the thing—and that after carting the rice off to market, he hid out with his mother's family in Ambatomitsangana. But even there he apparently had a lot of enemies. Rapiera had a violent temperament. His neighbors were a bit afraid of him. But now, word had gone out that he was suspected of the crime, and that not even his own father was willing to defend him—which, remember, was by this time tantamount to making him fair game. Two months after the ordeal, Rapiera picked one fight too many; that afternoon he was surrounded by men with sickles, spades, and other agricultural implements, who slashed and pummeled him to death.

This was the case I mentioned in the introduction: it was unusual in part because some of Rapiera's friends—mainly his mother's relatives—appeared in Arivonimamo the next day to report the murder to the gendarmes. Faced with an outright murder in the plain sight of angry witnesses, they ultimately agreed to get in a van and arrest the two men who seemed to have initiated it. After a trial, they were convicted and sentenced to several years in jail. The family then placed Rapiera's body in his mother's tomb.

About Catastrophes

Now I obviously do not mean to suggest that, were it not for a single freak rainstorm, Betafo would never have become a divided community. In fact, the divisions already existed; they had coalesced especially around the issue of Ratsizafy's marriage, even if they could only be expressed covertly.[35] The divisions had even emerged somewhat into the open in the elections of 1983. In a sense, what the ordeal really marked was the definitive check to one project for bringing the community back together. If there had been no freak rainstorm that February, then, there would eventually have been something else.

The situation in 1980s in many ways bears a remarkable resemblance to what James Scott (1992) has described as typical of situations of extreme inequality of power. Whenever there is a clear division between groups, one of which equally clearly dominates the other, then always, he says, one finds the same phenomena. Certain contexts are marked as public spaces in which members of the two groups interact; always this space is marked by fearful silences, lip service to ideologies which no one really believes; resentments abound but can only be expressed in covert or indirect, symbolic forms (pilfering, veiled threats of sorcery). Every now and then, he adds, one encounters historical moments when someone actually says, in public, what others have endlessly repeated behind closed doors, an act almost always accompanied by an enormous feeling of release and transformation. What is odd about Betafo is that, for all its similarities, this was *not* a case of extreme inequality of power. The kind of coercive force that normally underpins such situations had, in fact, been taken off the scene.[36]

On the other hand, the moment of the ordeal was not exactly a total moment of release. To paraphrase my own introduction: a wall of silence cracked, but it did not collapse entirely. The event did give those who felt Ratsizafy's marriage to be inappropriate a way of openly objecting to it—though one which was still a little bit oblique[37]—but it is not as if they suddenly felt they could openly refer to him as a slave, or, say, start reacting to any mention of his *trano manara* with hails of derisive laughter instead of sullen silence.

Still, other things changed. Instead of being used to make statements about unity, rituals began to echo themes of confrontation. During Ratsizafy's *famadihana* that August, he became terribly drunk and began openly declaring that he was not allowing any descendants of Andrianamboninolona inside his house, that he resented the way so many of them had come to eat his food.

Some of his *andriana* guests tried to ignore him; others quickly turned away and returned home. Not two months later, a young *andriana* woman appeared from the east coast, possessed by Andrianambololona, bemoaning the fact that his tomb was surrounded on all sides by dirty slaves and demanding a *famadihana*. The local *andriana* quickly threw together a *famadihana* attended by many of the urban elite, from which black people were almost completely excluded.

Political events, I have argued, are not just ones that generate stories or other representations; they must, by doing so, have broader consequences. For this to be a meaningful definition, too, these broader consequences can't just be confined to an ongoing circle of talk; at some point it has to play some role in shaping how people relate to one another in their daily lives. By these lights, though, the ordeal can be considered a political event. It did affect how people interacted. To a certain extent this was because changing the implicit rules about what could and could not be said itself had consequences; it was in the wake of the ordeal that Norbert began to give open voice to his family's hidden resentments about the *andriana* of *tampon-tanana*—about his grandfather being placed in the pigsty—and throwing it in the face of Miadana and Claude. Even more significant (since Norbert was unusual) was the fact that other members of Ingahirainy's family backed him up and even repeated his accusations, rather than responding with the usual embarrassed silence. This in turn had very immediate effects on patterns of daily interaction: many people stopped visiting *tampon-tanana,* or even, using the main path that obliged them to walk through it; Miadana and her family found their movements in Betafo were suddenly circumscribed.

The most dramatic change, though, was in the relations between the three men who had played the greatest part in conducting the ordeal itself: Augustin, Ratsizafy, and Sely. By winter, they had become the bitterest of enemies. Within a year, Sely, who at least during the ordeal played the part of leader of the *andriana* community, had been entirely destroyed by their machinations, and was well on the way to losing everything he had.

It took me a while to find out what happened between these three. Sely's name, though, was one I heard constantly. There were endless stories about the man and his catastrophic fate. But no one ever mentioned his enemies when they told them—unless, that is, it was the character of his enemies that were the original subject of conversation. Everyone emphasized the way Sely had brought it on himself. By 1990, he was a veritable pariah.

In this, the case of Sely provides a remarkable contrast with that of Ratsizafy. Ratsizafy was a man who many believed had committed terrible transgressions; but aside from having lost some of his rice one day to an unexpected rainstorm, nothing bad ever seemed to happen to him. Sely had actually had a very similar history. Like Ratsizafy, he had built up a powerful reputation by identifying himself with a famous *razambe*; he had long been married to a woman of similar status, had no children, then finally succeeded in having children after leaving her to marry across the *andriana/mainty* divide. In a way it was entirely appropriate that, during the ordeal, he should have been the man that gathered the earth at Andrianambololona's tomb. But for him, the ordeal did not just mark a check to his political ambitions. It was genuinely catastrophic. And because he had been laid so low, no one had the slightest hesitation about openly declaring the Sely had done terrible, terrible, stupid things.

The Destruction of Sely

By the time I knew Sely, his destruction was complete. He was fifty years old by then, a slight man, frail and nervous, with a beaked nose but otherwise delicate features. His voice was querulous and reedy. He tended to move around quickly, almost furtively, but always wrapped up in a handsome patterned cloth of black, white, and brown, which he would wear over his shirt and trousers, and somewhat unusually, even use to cowl his head, pulling down his straw hat on top of it. It was a beautiful cloth—I never saw another one in Madagascar quite so elegantly understated in color and design—and I often wondered whether he wore it, now, as a kind of last protestation, almost an act of defiance, as if trying to shroud himself in a reminder of what he had once been like.

There was a time that Sely was much noted for his elegance of dress. During the ordeal in 1987, he had been the very picture of the *andriana* gentleman: back then he was almost never seen without an umbrella to ward off the sun or rain, his clothes were always ironed, his feet were always inside shoes, and his shoes untouched by the mud of paddy fields.

I have already spoken of the distant images people had of the glory days of *tampon-tanana,* based vaguely on the first generation of the colonial era: images of twilit parties with music and dancing under the verandahs, *andriana* wrapped "like kings" in colorful silk mantles, wearing golden diadems.

Many would recall the time of *ketsa,* the busiest time of the agricultural year, when workers drove teams of oxen and transplanted rice from nurseries into the newly harrowed fields, while the great *andriana* would stand on the ridges under their umbrellas, gazing down to follow the progress of the work. They would never descend into the valley bottoms themselves, but each family would slaughter cattle and have the meat cut into strips to reward the workers afterward. Strips of beef, cooked with salt and garlic, would be laid out on top of palm leaves, portioned out to each *mainty* family according to the number of their children (whether or not, one *andriana* hastened to inform me, those children had actually shown up that day to work).

This world was thought to have come to an abrupt end with the fire of 1931, but the image of the "great *andriana*" lingered on (periodically reinforced during funerals for their modern-day descendants.) Such images were in their own way as integral to the memories evoked by *tampon-tanana* as Andrianambololona himself, with his soldiers and his devastating punishment by fire, or memories of oppressive functionaries like Ralaitsivery and Andriantonga. Sely was a man who had built his entire career on identifying himself with that history, on making himself a living embodiment of that imagined aristocracy. In the end, it turned on him.

Sely was born in Antsahavory, the largest village in the western *fokonatany*, in 1939. At the time, *tampon-tanana* had been lying entirely abandoned for several years.[38] During the 1940s, his uncle Raoelizaka (b. 1918) had been the first to return there and built a new house amidst the wreckage. Raoelizaka did not own much land near Betafo itself, but he managed to establish himself as manager the land of the wealthy urban absentees who owned most of the best fields in the district—most of whom he already knew quite well, because he shared their tomb.

I should explain here that almost all of these wealthy absentees[39] were affiliated with a single tomb: the central tomb of the *Telo Milahatra,* which stood to the west of Betafo's church. Since Raoelizaka was the only adult male descendant of this tomb who still lived in the region, he was the man with whom wealthy descendants in the capital had to consult about its upkeep; who had to be sent word if someone was to be buried there, who played the crucial role on those rare occasions when the tomb was opened for a *famadihana*.[40] It was thus relatively easy for him to take over management of their fields as well. And he did quite well by it. Sharecroppers got to keep two thirds of the harvest; by

hiring *mainty* laborers to do the work, and selling most of the yields on the market, he managed to become, by local standards, rich.

When Sely was twenty he moved in with his uncle, to help him in his work. A few years later he married an *andriana* woman named Raline, originally from western Imerina[41] and built a house of his own, just to the south of his uncle's—on the very spot, I was told, where Ralaitsivery's house had once stood. They lived there together for almost twenty years.

Managing the properties was apparently lucrative enough to keep both men and their families in a high degree of comfort, even luxury. Aside from Rakotonarivo Auguste, they were the only inhabitants of Betafo who both did not engage in agricultural labor, and were able to employ domestic servants. They were famous for dressing like town people, for never descending into the mud of the rice fields, or even sharing meals with the workers they employed. By doing so, they were staking an historical claim, through their maternal ancestry: not only evoking the memories of an imagined ancient aristocracy, but affiliating themselves with members of a distant, urban social class, posing as displaced fragments of the "Merina bourgeoisie."

This would-be elite, however, was not very successful in reproducing themselves. Raoelizaka had no children.[42] Neither did Sely and Raline.

When Raoelizaka died in 1978, Sely took his place as manager. By then, he had also developed a minor reputation for his knowledge of medicine. He kept his own hail charm—it protected the fields he managed, as well as his own—and was rumored to know something about lightning medicine. A number of people told me his skill as a curer was once close to that of Ratsizafy; and while they almost certainly exaggerated, he had developed something of a local clientele, mostly composed of poor *andriana* from Antsahavory and other villages out west. He did not demand money for his services, but then, most of his clients were relatives. It was all primarily a way of marking himself a person to be taken seriously, and—since he would always hint that his powers had some relation to the great white tomb that stood next to his house—to reinforce the impression that had a privileged relation to the *razambe*.

In many ways, in fact, the persona Sely developed was based on his proximity to important tombs. To his rural kin, he made himself a living image of the former glory of *tampon-tanana,* and implied that he had special access to the *hasina* of its tombs. To his urban kin, he was the local owner of their tomb

in the *Telo Milahatra*—those who had left their ancestral lands referred to such rural kinspeople as *valala mpiandry fasana,* "crickets minding the tombs." But according to most accounts, it was this very proximity that made him so vulnerable.

One shouldn't go breaking *fady*, Irina told me, when you live—what is it?—no more than five or six meters from the tomb of the Great Ancestor. But the man didn't think before he acted. Now look at him. He used to be one of the wealthiest men in the territory. Used to hire servants to do everything, never took off his shoes or dirtied his toes in the mud. Now he's like one of those bums you see on the street in Antananarivo. It's really heartbreaking. Nety had an even more striking way of summing up his downfall: he's reduced, she said, to doing odd jobs for his former hirelings.

Sely had done so many things wrong there were a dozen points at which to start the story. But most everyone agreed his first mistake was when, around 1980, he left his wife and married someone who would give him children. He ended up marrying a certain Rasoa, a black woman from a province to the south, twenty years his junior, who had been previously employed as a servant in his house.

The first time Miadana told me the story she represented it as an example of the classic dilemma: one can have wealth or descendants, but it's almost impossible to have both:

> Miadana: There was a person here, for instance, an *andriana* who married another *andriana*, an *andriana* from Mantasoa. They married. But the only problem was, they didn't have any children to take care of. So at first they just took care of each other. The man, however, still wished for descendants. So his wife said, "Well, if you really must to marry again, if you must look for a new wife, then: keep it in the family. Take someone of the same ancestry as me to be your wife." The man didn't want to: "No," he said, "just let me take whoever it is I like." And when he took whoever he liked, it was a worker that he took. That is: one of his servants.
>
> And they did have children—that went fine. But he ended up ruined. Even though he had been among the richest people here—if there was one man wealthier, he was definitely the second. He was rich. Now, he doesn't have so much as a single piece of land. Children, however, he has. The children are there, but the whole of his property is gone. He sold it all. He just sold it and sold it until not a single bit was left. Sold his rice fields, sold his dry fields, sold the eucalyptus trees, sold all his moveable property, sold the plates, the pots, there was nothing left standing. It was gone.

When I asked people why Sely married his house servant, when he was a rich man and there was no lack of young *andriana* women who would have

been willing to marry him, they would usually just say "He wanted to have children," and leave it at that. It made me wonder, for a while, whether there was some notion that black women are more fertile—though I had never heard this otherwise. I finally realized there was a much simpler explanation. Sely had been sleeping with the maid. He got her pregnant. When she announced that she was going to bear his child, he realized that all he had to do was make the union official, and he would be guaranteed legitimate descendants. So he did.

She bore him a girl immediately, then a boy two years after that. But here again it was the very fertility of the marriage that made it problematic, particularly, for someone so close to the *razambe*. Almost from the moment they were married, Rasoa's health began to deteriorate. Soon it was as if as soon as she got over one illness, she'd be in bed with another. Sely would put all his skill and energies into nursing her. Many already suspected there might be some significance in Rasoa's illnesses, but things only really turned disastrous after the ordeal.

The way most people told the story, it was as if the whole thing happened of its own accord. Suddenly, Sely began to fall more and more catastrophically into debt. The further into debt he fell, the more frenetically he sold off his possessions, so that within the space of less than a year, he had—as Miadana said—lost everything. And all the time his wife became more and more seriously ill; by the time his ruination was complete, she died. That's the way they made it sound. It was as if one day he just cracked, took bad loans, sold everything he had in a bizarre self-destructive frenzy. There may be a grain of truth in this. But there were definitely human agents in his downfall, too.

Again, a little background. Apart from Sely, the only person in the territory descended from the central tomb of the *Telo Milahatra* was Razafisoa (b. 1933). Razaifisoa was the orphaned granddaughter of a former *notable;* the reader will remember that, as a young woman, Razafisoa fell in love with Augustin's father Rabera and married him. The couple was childless, but she adopted Augustin as her son. Now, I only talked to Razafisoa a couple times when I was in Betafo (she was not a very easy woman to talk to) but everyone tended to represent her as an innocent, simple-hearted woman, well-meaning but easily manipulated. She left it to her husband to control her property—as a result, Rabera soon became known as the richest man in Betafo.[43]

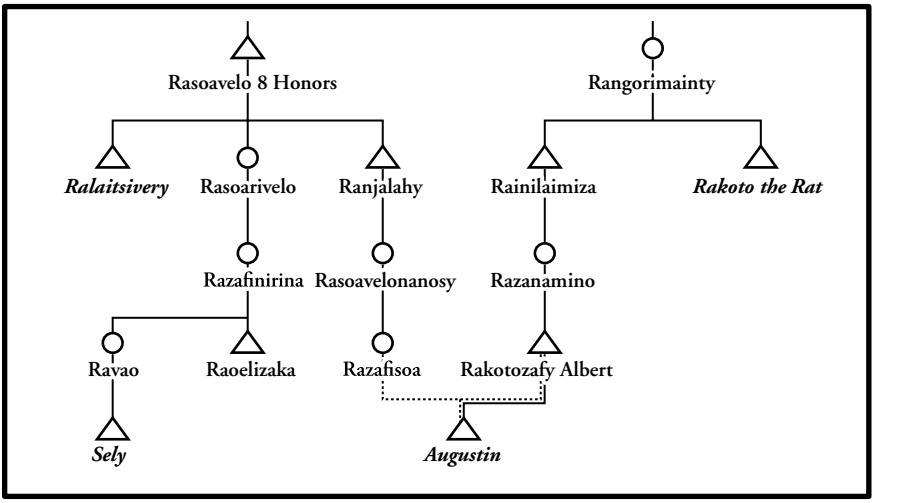
By the late 1970s, while Augustin was serving his first term as *President Fokontany*, he also began trying to establish himself as a rival to Sely. Like

Raoelizaka, he first got to know the urban absentees because he shared their tomb—since in matters concerning the tomb, he acted as agent for his mother, Razafisoa. Before long he had become de facto guardian of most absentee tombs around Betafo (in part this was a creative extension of his duties as president) and had begun to get some contracts for sharecropping as well. The way he presented himself was very different from Sely. Where one played the genteel aristocrat, Augustin was the industrious, responsible worker—his reputation was for competence, diligence, and as a man not afraid to get some mud between his toes. Whenever he hired people to work a field, he always did an equal share of the work himself. By the mid-80s he had gradually been able to make substantial inroads in Sely's former business: several absentees had put all their land under his management, others had transferred half to him.

In July of 1988, five months after the ordeal, Augustin happened to notice that Sely was short of money. He chose that moment to declare that he intended to carry out a *famadihana*—a very "famous," extravagant, expensive one—at Ambohitrimaninana—and, since Razafisoa was his adopted mother, he was going to open the central tomb of the *Telo Milahatra* as well. Sely had no choice but to offer to sign on as co-sponsor. As a descendant, it was his responsibility to take part if his ancestral tomb was opened. Not to have done so would have been meant utter humiliation. In fact, he would have been doubly humiliated: both before his rural kin—since so much of his prestige was based identifying himself with the ancestors in that very tomb—and also, before the absentees who shared it with him, who provided him with his living, and who Augustin had been trying to woo away. At least some of those absentees would almost certainly have been in attendance.

Here's how Claude explained it to Ramanana and me. Augustin, he said, conspired to ruin Sely. Ratsizafy joined in to help him:

> Claude: Sely's mother and Razafisoa's mother are both in the same tomb. So it was, "Look at this, Sely: they're going to be wrapping your mother!" Sely, however, didn't have any money. So they covered Sely's share for him. Then as soon as the *famadihana* was finished, they immediately started occupying his land. That's how Ingahy Ratsizafy got hold of Sely's ricefields, too.
> Miadana: Two years ago Sely still had rice fields. Then he borrowed money from Ratsizafy for that *famadihana*. As soon as the loan came due, Ratsizafy started taking away his fields. And that's what really got us mad at him: "If you've got to go selling your fields, Sely, why couldn't you have sold them to *us*?"



11.3. Why Augustin hates Sely

At first, Augustin and Sely appeared to be equal partners. Both signed the papers making the official request to hold a *famadihana*. Both found their own astrologer: Augustin hired Ratsizafy, Sely, a female astrologer from up north. But the two astrologers found it impossible to cooperate—they couldn't even agree about the date—and in the end, the woman quit. The *famadihana* was to be elaborate: there were musicians to hire, two *hira gasy* troupes to play at the celebrations afterward, pigs to be killed for the feast. When Sely admitted he could not yet provide his share of the expenses, Augustin and Ratsizafy offered to cover his share themselves, and had Sely sign papers for the loans. Sely must have hardly looked at them, or anyway, he seemed oddly oblivious to the fact that they involved the harshest possible terms: interest would be due each month, in case of default, they would immediately have the right to appropriate his lands.

The *famadihana* itself went without a hitch. The first tomb to be opened was Sely's father's in Antsahavory, which was opened in the early hours of the morning, before the sun came up. Next was Augustin's tomb at Ambohitrimaninana, where he and his father first wrapped his father's ancestors in the *Tsidirambinanto,* then opened Augustin's own tomb where his mother's ancestors were buried: Rangorimainty, and Rainilaimiza, whose brother had

been sent to Devil's Island. Finally, they returned to Betafo itself to open the *Telo Milahatra,* where all the most famous of the ancient *andriana*'s body's were removed and laid on women's laps within the clay walls of the sanctuary: Rasoavelo 6 Honors, his brother Andrianaivo the Younger, the governor Andriantonga, his brother Ralaitsivery (who had been murdered), the functionaries Ralaimanarivo and Rabe Leon, the historian Rakotonarivo Auguste, each of them by now merged and bundled with any number of other less famous ancestors, whose names had been forgotten; and finally, Sely's own mother, Ravao.

It was a singular *famadihana*. Ratsizafy presided, dressed in his trademark beige jacket and a patterned yellow *lamba hoany* wrapped around his loins, occasionally lighting sticks of incense he had bought from Pakistani vendors in the capital (another personal trademark), wearing a necklace of ancient beads.[44] Ratsizafy was one of the few people in Betafo who had actually met most of these men; now, he was directing a celebration meant to honor their memories, but, at the same time, to destroy what remained of their bodies and hasten the process of effacing them. In this case, too, the whole situation of memory was even more ambivalent than usual, first of all, because these ancestors' names had all been carefully recorded in Rakotonarivo's books and papers, and thus were much more difficult to efface. In a way, it was the closest Ratsizafy ever came to directly facing the power of bureaucratic history those men embodied, and which, I have said, created the ultimate limit on his own personal ambitions. Also, because the memories of these ancestors were much less constraining for descendants whose status so much depended on them, and who had, anyway, already long since moved away. Not that they could not also be terribly destructive; in fact, he himself was in the process of using them to destroy their principle local representative of the present day.

Within a matter of months after the *famadihana*, Sely began to miss his interest payments, and Augustin and Ratsizafy began to take away his fields.

That Augustin had always hated Sely; that was a matter of common knowledge. He had never publicly admitted it; but this was not the sort of thing one would ever have openly declared. It was palpable. Nor were the reasons very hard to understand—if anything, it was overdetermined. The two men were rivals in organizing sharecropping; a rivalry made all the more intense because of Sely's elite pretensions, and Augustin's *mainty* origins. Rumor had it both were sleeping with each other's wives. Or, to be more exact, Sely had been conducting an occasional affair with Augustin's wife Marie; Augustin, with Sely's former wife

Raline (who had moved to Antsahavory when they separated). Actually, this in itself might not have been overly significant; it was the sort of thing, people told me, you often found when two men or two women are already rivals. The ultimate reason, though, went back over eighty years. Rakoto the Rat, the former slave who had been so endlessly abased and tormented by his former teacher Ralaitsivery, did not have any children of his own. But his brother did; and Augustin, as the owner of the tomb that Rakoto the Rat would have been buried in had he not been exiled to South America and his body lost, was the living guardian of his memory. Sely, in turn, was descended from Ralaitsivery's sister—he was the closest living descendant of the man remaining in Betafo, and he, too, had built his entire life around making the most of that descent.[45] To make the connection all the more undeniable: Augustin was living in the house Rainilaimiza had built in Andrianony; Sely had chosen to build his on the very spot where Ralaitsivery's house once stood.

The humiliation of Sely, then, was the final answer to Ralaitsivery's humiliation of Rakoto the Rat—his endless campaign of abuse which finally destroyed the lives of both of them. True, many people in Betafo did not even know this story—or if they knew it, it was only in bits and snatches. But for Augustin, this was family history, and a story that played the same role as a hidden source of bitterness and resentment that the stories of the pigsty played for the families of Norbert and Armand.

The ordeal had allowed a hidden grievance of many *andriana* to find expression; afterward all sorts of hidden grievances and resentments had begun to find a voice. In a sense, this was just another instance of the same thing. Augustin had spent more than a decade trying his best to hold together some semblance of a unified community embracing black and white; if it was impossible . . . well, then, he had grievances of his own to be redressed. And it was particularly in the context of a *famadihana*—which were already battles over memory—that such grievances could be most easily expressed.[46] In fact, he managed to make the process of opening the tombs, and handling the bodies which connected both of them to that history, the very method of his vengeance.

As for why Sely seemed so willing to be ruined, that is much more difficult to fathom. Miadana did have a point. Why hadn't he sold the lands to her? Or turned to some other *andriana* relative? If he had needed a loan, they would have provided infinitely better terms. If he sold them land, it would be understood that he would always have been able to buy it back. Instead, he

sold lands only to his enemies; in fact, he never even admitted to other *andriana* what was happening, but tried to disguise his plight until the end. Many seemed as puzzled as I by his behavior. Others suggested he was too ashamed to face them. After all, his whole social role was based on keeping up appearances. To go begging for help from local cousins would have undermined his reputation; to have revealed his situation to wealthy absentees would also have been revealing himself to be a poor financial manager, and that would have undermined his livelihood.

The idea that he was trying to save face might explain the beginning. It cannot explain what happened in the end. Because very quickly, Sely had very little face to save. Augustin in particular was determined that he not only lose everything, but that he be entirely humiliated in the process. The loans were short-term, high interest; the collateral was worth far more than the loans themselves. Almost as soon as he began defaulting, Ratsizafy started taking the lands away. Augustin, on the other hand, demanded work. If Sely owed 300 *ariary* for that month's interest, Augustin would demand three days of work (100 *ariary* a day was what he paid his laborers) just for the pleasure of seeing Sely finally have to take off his shoes and descend into the mud.

Within a year's time, Sely didn't have shoes to take off, because he'd sold them. He had quite literally sold everything he had. He sold rice fields to Augustin at a fraction of their actual worth, never quite pulling himself out of debt. He borrowed money from notorious loan sharks in Arivonimamo, hoping to pay back Ratsizafy, and so ended up getting even deeper in debt. He sold land he didn't own, but merely managed—which hastened the absentees' abandoning his services and switching over to Augustin. He fell into a catastrophic vicious cycle in which his every effort to hide the extremity of his situation ended up further alienating the very people before whom he was most ashamed. "Sely?" one old man asked me, when I casually mentioned his name—his face immediately breaking into an uncharacteristic scowl. "You mean, Sely who sold the ancestral lands?" Within the space of about a year, he had sold every single piece of land he owned, including his own ancestral holdings in Antsahavory, to his enemies. It was only when he had nothing left but his household furnishings, Miadana told us, that he revealed his situation to his former friends.

> Miadana: And *that's* when he finally comes galloping over to us: "Here, you can buy this pot, you can buy this plate now . . ." The last of it was when we came to look in his house and there were still some rattan chairs there that I picked up,

> and there was still a big chest but . . . I don't know, it was like I couldn't bring myself to take it. And the very last was when he tried to sell us his shelf in the tomb. And his house. I didn't dare. "So where are your children going to live if you do that?"

Now, it's interesting that, for all Miadana's sometime protests about ancestors getting the blame for what were really acts of human spite, she never suggested that was what happened to Sely. No one did. Despite the fact that it would not have been entirely untrue. But no one ever spontaneously brought up Augustin's role, unless they were already talking about Augustin. If they were talking about Sely, it was always a question of broken *fady.* Indeed, here too he seems to have fallen into a catastrophic vicious cycle, and people were able to come up with any number of different examples of things he might have done to offend the *razambe.* He himself did little to discourage this impression. After having failed to save his wife's life, for instance, he abandoned all his medicine. According to Nivo, he more or less admitted he had been forced to, because he had offended the ancestor on whose *hasina* it all was based:

> Nivo: He himself told us that he didn't used to eat *anantsinahy,* because had a hail charm. But he doesn't do it any more because he transgressed it. He definitely does know all about curing: every kind that Ratsizafy can do, he can too; it's just that, the thing once having turned on him, it won't come back again. (Because of that woman he married.)
> David: You mean he violated a *fady*?
> Nivo: He certainly did, he violated the . . . In this town here, that just wasn't right.
> David: I don't know, maybe it's like some psychological thing, but it seems like he's constantly trying to destroy himself. It seems—I don't know, but it's like after he got married his brain turned backwards and he became convinced he had done something terrible, and after that, he was just continually self-destructive.
> Nivo: What really got him was this: if you live here, there are all sorts of *fady* you have to keep. And he just couldn't handle it. He couldn't keep them, so everything turned back on him.
>
> Because what happened with him: he went to that tomb there to ask for the ancestor's blessing. But he didn't get one. Up till then, everyone who asked for a blessing had always got one. But with him, it was as if the person [the ancestor] spoke to him and said, "*You*! What are *you* doing asking for a blessing, there?" he said, and he said there was like a big groaning sound, and he broke down shivering in a fever sweat.
>
> We didn't say anything. We don't believe in any of that kind of nonsense. We just acted like everything was fine, fine . . . But Sely, he was really a changed man after that.
>
> And another thing about him . . . even aside from his marrying that woman, it should be pointed out that one thing that got him was that when the woman died, he put her in his tomb.

DAVID: In the *Telo Milihatra*?
NIVO: Yes, in the central one. That was completely inappropriate.
DAVID: And they also say . . . what was it? That she wore some cloth?
NIVO: Oh, well that one was like this: when they were going to have the *famadihana* (this was when the woman was still alive) they bought the cloth. And that cloth was meant for wrapping—or, to be one of the cloths used in wrapping—the ancestor. But that wasn't what they did: they used it for clothing instead.
DAVID: So what kind of cloth was it?
NIVO: Just simple white polyester.

Then they took it to the *famadihana* after all, and that was wrong, and when the *famadihana* was over, she was sick, sick, sick, sick all the time. Finally the ancestor pressed down on her again—he spoke through the woman's illness. This must have been when she was about to die, I guess; he had Sely carry her out—"put her there on the ground" he said (speaking through her illness), and he took her off the bed, lowered her down, and that was where she died.

I didn't have the heart to ask Sely his version of the story (he obviously didn't want me to). Perhaps it would not be fair to try to guess what he was thinking to make him act the way he did. But Nivo's assessment seems penetrating. "Everything turned back on him." Having built a career on presuming a privileged relation with an ancestor who was (as Augustin, especially, liked to point out) notorious for his cruelty, he nonetheless married a woman of *mainty* origins. True, others had done so, and had come out unscathed. Still he must have been a little anxious from the start; and probably, not entirely unaware that others thought his wife's frequent illness might have been the result. After the ordeal he was probably doubly shaken by the destruction of his rice. Then, when his troubles really began, and he began to fall into Augustin's trap, he went to the tomb to beg forgiveness, to ask the ancestor's blessing, his *tsodrano*.

It is a peculiar feature of Andrianambololona's tomb—presumably, having to do with the way it sometimes catches the wind—that it occasionally seems to let out a sound that seems like a very loud groan.[47] At any rate, while Sely was kneeling in prayer before the tomb, his offering of rum or honey placed on its roof above, it happened. And Sely suffered a sudden collapse of confidence. He seems to have become convinced the ancestor had turned on him. After that he was, as Nivo said, a changed man.

His behavior seemed perversely contradictory; he seemed to gyrate between ridiculous extremes. He spent all his free time nursing and nurturing his wife—taking out even more bad loans to buy her every kind of medicine, staying with her during her increasingly frequent bouts of fever—then, as she was lying on her deathbed, suddenly began hearing the ancestor speaking to

him, telling him, "Why are you letting that slave-woman die on my bed? It's too good for her! Take her out of this *andriana* house to die on the cold ground." And so he carried her out even as she was dying, and placed her on the ground outside his house. And having done so, he immediately afterward decided—against all precedent—to place her body inside the very most prestigious *andriana* tomb. Maybe it was guilt. Or who knows, maybe anger: she had, not months before, been wearing a shroud meant for that tomb's ancestors, many were suggesting that was what killed her, maybe placing her among them was his way of having his revenge. A month or two later, he was trying to sell Miadana the very shelf he'd put her on.

By the time I knew him, Sely had nothing left. He supported himself and his two children, very meagerly, by working for others, and as a manufacturer of bricks. His whole manner had changed, partly an effect of being surrounded by so many people who simultaneously pitied and hated him: he seemed at once cloying, ingratiating, apologetic, scheming. He wasn't a very good worker. Neither was he a particularly good businessman. "He isn't used to the work," Miadana observed, throwing up her eyes when I asked her. "Even with those bricks, he doesn't really do much; he tries to order his partners around, and then he cooks for them." He was reduced, in other words, to a pathetic caricature of the ancient *andriana* he once made his model, who used to stand on the top of the hill directing their laborers, and preparing the feasts that would come afterward. And he never, apparently, told anyone his version of what happened to him except on those rare occasions when he would get very drunk, and pace around *tampon-tanana* shouting to no one in particular to watch out for Augustin: the man was a treacherous liar and a thief.

The Tragedy of Rabera

Within six months after their *famadihana*, Sely's wife Rasoa was dead. But so too was Rabera, Augustin's father. In fact, they died within days of one another.

Rabera, of course, was the man who had married the wealthy Razafisoa, and together with her, raised his son Augustin. He quickly became known as one of the wealthiest, perhaps the wealthiest, man in Betafo. *Andriana* used to recall his three cows that used to occasionally get loose and damage other people's crops; whenever someone complained, he seemed to relish the opportunity to immediately reply "How much are you charging per kilo for your rice? I'll just buy up everything that's damaged."

In 1982, Rabera was 60. His son Augustin was by this time finishing his second term as President Fokontany, long married, with four children of his own approaching maturity. Suddenly, Rabera announced he too wanted to separate from his wife and marry a younger woman. He wanted more descendants.

What had really happened, apparently, was this. Rabera, a descendant of slaves who in his youth had nonetheless managed to convince two successive *andriana* women to dedicate their lives to him, had now, himself, fallen in love. He had fallen in love with woman he had met when off trading plows in the town of Analavory, a day's journey to the west. He installed Razifisoa in a house in Andrianony he had recently purchased, not far from his own; then brought the woman home to his own house, next to that of his son Augustin. Miadana, for one, was convinced the whole affair was brought about by love magic:

> Miadana: But this is the amazing thing: first he divorced Razafisoa. He separated from Razafisoa. And having separated from Razafisoa, he married his third wife. And who was it had go request the bride? Razafisoa! And what was the reason for that? It wasn't medicine?

Others' views were more nuanced. Definitely, said some, he was infatuated. It might very well have been medicine that caused it; but it is true, others added, that sometimes people do just fall in love. As for Razafisoa's leading the party, some (who were closer to the family) suggested this was actually Augustin's doing. Augustin and his adopted mother had always been very close. With his father suddenly swept away by this new passion, anything could happen; one had to be suspicious of this woman's motives, therefore, Augustin convinced her to go along in order to make sure the woman understood that the rest of the family still existed, and they were going to be keeping a careful eye on her. If so, it was to no avail. The woman bore him children—two or three in rapid succession—but after a year or two, she also had somehow convinced her husband to begin selling everything off. He did not, it's true, do it in such a self-destructive fashion as Sely. That is, he got a fair price for them. But it was, by all accounts, similarly total. All the rice fields Razafisoa had signed over to his name, the animals, the fields for dry crop cultivation, household furnishings, even two of his three houses . . . All the time, Rabera refused to talk about the matter, or lied, or made up transparently ridiculous excuses. He was so entranced, apparently, that he could refuse his new wife nothing, hanging on her every whim. In the end, when he had nothing left to his name but his own house and his three cows, and was spending more and more of his time trying to support himself with his business of marketing plows and shovels, she

suddenly left him for a Tandroy cattle merchant, and went back home with him to her brother's house in Analavory, taking her infant children with her.

Rabera was devastated. As soon as he heard the news, he set out to Analavory to speak to her. At that point he didn't even have the money for carfare. All he had left was his three cows. One by one, he sold them, each time to finance another trip to Analavory, to beg her to come back:

> Miadana: The late Rabera went off to follow her there. His son tried to stop him: "Don't go off there, father—just forget it." But he wouldn't listen. He set off to go there. When he arrived in Analavory, he was practically physically attacked by the woman's brother. So he understood what was going on, and he left.
>
> But then he went back again. He went there, and the woman said, "Go home! I don't want you! I don't want you and I don't want you coming around here any more either! I don't want you coming to see me." He went home. Went home to Arivonimamo. It was Friday. He had come home on a Friday. He wasn't wearing anything except a bit of basketry he had wrapped around him like a cloth. He had become filthy and skinny when he arrived. But he didn't last till Monday before it was "I'm going to go there again." So he went off again to see the woman. He came to her again, still the woman drove him away. "Go home! I don't want you any more! Get lost! Go! I don't want to ever have to see you again!"
>
> There on the road, the man suddenly got sick. He had turned his head home, but then he became sick and died there. Died there on the road.
>
> Word was sent to his son here: "Your father is dead out there." So he went off to get him, on Tuesday—he had started on Friday, went on a Monday, it was on Tuesday that he died. They went off to fetch him on Wednesday. Then they came here and they buried him on the Friday after that. I was sick during the time they were keeping vigil over the body. But at twelve o'clock at night, they still hadn't really started, but by that time the house stank so they found it impossible to breathe. Stank! There was really foul-smelling blood flowing out of him.
>
> At the time, I was helping with the vigil for Sely's wife here. Sely's wife was in there, dead, and I was cooking, preparing a meal for the people in there with her. Later Razafisoa told us what had happened. "None of us," she said, "could stay in that house because it stank so. It was impossible." Even though the funeral was supposed to be at one o'clock on Friday, there was nobody there for the funeral, because by nine in the morning, they had already buried him. When they got to the tomb, his belly had already burst. "Perhaps," they said, "the man was struck down by *manara mody*."
>
> (That's a kind of *ody* she would have placed on the man. It means: he doesn't die at the woman's house, but on the way home. It was only when he arrived here at his ancestral lands he died.)

The first time I heard this story, Miadana told it as a story about love magic, a typical example of a man who falls completely in the thrall of a woman skilled in medicine, who ends up destroying him.

The interesting thing about this story, especially as compared to Sely, is that it did not become an integral part of the historical or political consciousness of Betafo; it did not become a great moral parable nor did it really sum up anything about the nature of Betafo's history, ancestors, antipathies. The woman was not from Betafo, the couple were both *mainty* (from all I could make out—the very fact that I am not entirely sure demonstrates how little relevance anyone attached to their backgrounds). What's more, for that very reason, the results could be easily undone. As in the case of Sely, a fair number of different families ultimately ended up with title to the lands and other properties he once owned: Armand, Ratsizafy, Ingahirainy, Martin (Norbert's younger brother), Rainibe. In all cases but the last, the lands and property were ultimately returned. After the funeral, Augustin, visited the buyers one after the other, explaining that his father, as everyone knew, had not been acting responsibly when he sold them, and that, since it was his family's ancestral land, it made them sad to have lost it. He offered to reimburse them whatever they had paid if they would return it, and, with a single exception, they agreed. In many cases Augustin didn't even have the cash on hand, but they agreed that as soon as he had it, they would give him the property back.

The single exception, however, was significant. Rainibe was not interested in returning anything. His family needed land too, he said, and anyway, a deal's a deal. The land was still in his hands in 1990, when I was there. His attitude was unusual, because, as I have said, in cases like this legal niceties of contract and sale were not normally taken to be that important; property rights were not ultimately backed up by an appeal to force anyway, but by a general recognition of principles of traditional right, and communal justice. But Rainibe, as everyone knew, had a *Vazimba*. He was one of the few people whose place in the community was not based on a reputation for decency, but on a reputation for having access to amoral hidden powers. Hence, even in the absence of the state, he could afford to take a legalistic attitude.

Augustin was also fortunate in that the all of the land had been sold to fellow *mainty*, and many, of the same lineage. It is not clear what would have happened if some had been *andriana*. Because another effect of the increasing lack of a sense of moral community that followed the ordeal was that such understandings no longer extended between the two. This, in fact, was one of the main reasons so many *andriana* ended up detesting Sely: everything he sold, he sold to the other side. He started his transgressions by marrying a black person, which might incense the ancestors but was not, really, the sort of thing

that would incense one's neighbors; he ended it by selling off the ancestral land to them—and that was entirely unforgivable. By the time I was in Betafo, the fact that all of Sely's holdings—including many fields in the western *fokontany*, around Antsahavory—were now in the hands of Augustin, Ratsizafy and other black people had become a concrete issue around which Betafo's *andriana* could focus the anger and dismay so many felt at the fact that they had, as Ramanana put it, "been defeated"—a defeat which was, rather confusingly, attributed at the same time to their own former immorality (their arrogance and oppression of their slaves) and to the present immorality of their former victims (their manipulation of money in deceitful violation of basic norms of decency, their use of medicine). Even more, it was the final proof of the lack of moral community between the two sides. After the ordeal, when attempts to reassert a moral community had effectively collapsed, economic relations between them had become increasingly predatory—rather than being based on trying to find a measured balance between traditional principle and an understanding of other people's needs, they became coldly legalistic—that is, relying on the sort of relations that would only, normally, be possible if backed by the threat of force. Black people had always been willing to loan money with the hope of winning title to *andriana* land, but in the past, most such arrangements were consensual; mostly, it was a matter of poor *andriana* selling land without admitting it. Now, creditors were much more likely to try to treat debtors as Augustin did Sely—even though they did not really have the power to force them to give up their lands. The result were endless hidden conflicts, contested titles other people often did not even know about, which further sharpened the lines of bitter silence dividing so many former friends.

Life Continues; Nothing Is Resolved

Thus the situation which I encountered when I showed up in Betafo at the beginning of 1990. "North" and "south" were by then so far divided that many did not even invite those on the other side to their weddings or funerals; even conversation between them been largely reduced to matter of polite formalities exchanged while passing on the road. There were those who tried to rise above all this: Miadana with her Sunday school, Armand and his family made a point of trying to mediate, even Augustin and Ratsizafy had not entirely abandoned their old ambitions, but everyone agreed that overall, people no longer trusted each other, there was nothing left of former communal solidarity.

It was not a situation that could last forever. But neither was it clear what would happen in the end. For all the assurances I heard from certain *olona mainty,* it seemed unlikely that the *andriana* population of Betafo (still a numerical majority in the east, and the overwhelming majority in the west) would simply drift away and disappear. At the same time, the *mainty* population was nothing if not entrenched.

In 1988 there were elections. Augustin ran and lost again. The victor was Rajaona, from Belanitra, the most prominent of the local descendants of Andriamaharo. Rajaona was not as passive as Andre; he and Augustin seemed to have ultimately come to a kind of tacit understanding, whereby each acted as president within their own domain. Though many (Pano for instance) still talked about Augustin as if he were the one and only *President Fokontany*.

As for Ratsizafy's family, their fate was entirely undecided. The year I was there was the year that Ratsizafy's eldest son, Pano, having passed his baccalaureate examination and served his year of national service, finally came home. For a year or two, Ratsizafy had been doing everything he could to get people used to the idea of Pano as his successor. He had kept him by his side at every *famadihana*, made him as his principle assistant in curing, constantly praising his remarkable skills and knowledge. He had not gotten very far in convincing anyone. Pano was only twenty-one years old, and not the sort of person it was easy to take seriously. Over and over I heard the same kind of comments: Pano is incompetent, Pano is sloppy, he doesn't really care. Some claimed the problem was his very education; he didn't really believe in his father's practice anyway, therefore, it wouldn't work for him. Everyone insisted that Noely was far more competent. Even some of his bitterest enemies seemed inclined to pity Ratsizafy for his dilemma. After all those years he finally has a male heir, even an *andriana* one . . . and look at him!

Matters began to come to a head in two separate events while I was there. In September 1990, a member of the lineage whose family had been living out west appeared to requested permission to hold a *famadihana* at Ambohitrimaninana, to convey his dead son's body in the tomb. Ratsizafy decided this would be a good moment to be conveniently out of town (he agreed to act as astrologer for a *famadihana* being held in Amboanana) so that Pano could make his debut officiating at a *famadihana* at Ambohitrimaninana. Almost immediately, everything started going wrong. Normally, outsiders are expected to sponsor an expensive feast for the *fokontany* if they conduct such a *famadihana*; Armand discovered that the sponsor had been slipping money to important

people (including, presumably, Pano) to combine this *famadihana* with another one to make it seem as if he had. Just as everyone had assembled, music playing, in front of the southern tomb at Ambohitrimanana, Armand—as representative of the *valala mpiandry fasana*—stood up on entry to the tomb and declared they were not going to dig it open until the matter was clarified. A near riot ensued. It was only the intervention of bystanders that prevented several people from coming to blows. Pano did his best to act authoritative; he even climbed on top Rainitamaina's tomb and started waving his authorization papers and insisting he could explain everything; everyone on both sides totally ignored him. In the end he was reduced to stomping off declaring that if everyone wanted to go on fighting and ignore him, well, they could dig open the tomb if they liked, but he wasn't going to put the *famato* the lock on the tomb's door afterward—and that meant the ancestors would be able to follow them all home and kill them. No one took that seriously either: after all, several people pointed out, Pano has ancestors in that tomb too. He would never dare.

Afterward, the story immediately began circulating that, when everyone ignored him, Pano had been reduced to tears.[48]

A month later Pano married. His wife, Fara, was one of Rainibe's granddaughters, and some remarked that made it a rather appropriate alliance, but Ratsizafy's wife's family was outraged. Razafy, the widow of Rabe and Ratsizafy's wife's eldest daughter, refused to attend the wedding ceremony. She had been going around Belanitra loudly complaining about the idea that an *andriana* like Pano would have anything to do with such a woman, who she openly referred to as a "slave." Matters were made even more complicated, I later discovered, by the fact that Fara really didn't like the idea of her husband making his living from astrology and curing, and was already trying to convince him to abandon his father's profession—let Noely carry on with it. They could make good enough a living off their land.

Pano and Fara moved into the middle house of the three that made up Morafeno. In the southernmost, lived Rakoto, confidentally assuring everyone that the final outcome would have to wait until the old man died. "Then," he said, "all three of us will have a contest of *fahaizana,* and we will see who wins."

Sely sank lower and lower in people's estimation. By the time I left, Claude had become convinced it was he who was responsible for their constant bouts of illness since coming to live in Betafo. He used to be a curer; that means he would certainly have the knowledge to bewitch. Since his defeat and impoverishment, Claude speculated, he had begun to lash out in rage and

resentment against everyone and anyone, causing them terrible pain and illness; and then, after seeing the results, became so overcome by guilt and pity that he would go home undo whatever he had done. Just before I left, several people reported in astonishment that they had been walking up a hill near the main road and saw Sely, and two strangers, lying in wait behind some trees; when the three saw they had been noticed, they quickly got up, brushed themselves off, and tried to walk casually away. The rumor spread instantly that Sely had become a bandit; people started wondering if they should lock their houses if they knew he was around.

But the strangest development, I heard the day before I left for the airport to return to America. I had been talking with Nivo and Narcisse near the Lycee in Arivonimamo. "Have you heard about Norbert?" she asked me. "For the last two or three days, he's just been walking up and down the paths around Betafo, staring intently at the ground, muttering to himself. At least that's what people say. When they ask him what he's doing, he just says that he lost something, but refuses to say what." Perhaps, she said, his wife's medicine has finally got to him. Perhaps he's gone insane.

EPILOGUE

12

In purely formal terms, this is a rather unusual ethnography. Its style is at times almost novelistic; at others, it shifts into much more conventional modes of ethnographic writing. The same characters who appear in one part of the text as actors often reappear in others as narrators or analysts, providing (often critical) commentary about customs, local issues, and each other. When I began writing, I had not entirely worked out most of the theoretical ideas about politics and narrative that now appear in it, so I cannot really say that I wrote it the way I did because of them. But I did want to convey the sense I had of the people I knew in Betafo as both actors in history, and as themselves historians. According to the very broad set of definitions I did work out in the course of writing, to represent them in this way is also to represent them as political beings. It is, I have argued, in so far as we all act in, recount, interpret, and criticize our social worlds that we are all political beings of one sort or another.[1]

Throughout the book, I have tried, whenever possible, to emphasize such areas of common ground. In fact, if there was one impulse—one might even say one moral imperative—that drove me from the very beginning, it was a desire to explode some of the sense of artificial distance that so many ethnographies create between author, audience, and the people who are being studied. I wanted the reader to be able to think of the inhabitants of Betafo as people they could at least imagine meeting and even, under the right set of circumstances, getting to know. If nothing else, I have tried at least in small ways to always emphasize how—cultural differences notwithstanding—we do inhabit the same world, and ultimately the same history and the same moral universe; or, if one wants to define history in a more culturally specific fashion, then at the very least, that we all *could* be sharing one.

Perhaps one way anthropologists might begin to undermine this sense of distance would be to look at what we're doing as more akin to history—which just about every culture has some way of thinking about—than to what we are used to thinking of as science. I'm not saying this in order to weigh in to the sporadic debate in anthropology about whether the discipline should define itself as a science or a humanity. To me at least, it seems a pointless argument: after all, people who are mainly interested in, say, problems of nutrition or verb structure are obviously going to be relying on a different set of methods than people who are mainly interested in understanding shamanic performance; as long as we all happen to have ended up in the same departments, it seems only reasonable to allow that our discipline is a hodgepodge and leave it at that. But the debate does raise some interesting issues. Why exactly is it, for instance, that history is considered one of the humanities, and not a social science? Obviously there are historical reasons—there were people who considered themselves historians long before there were ones who considered themselves social scientists (or for that matter natural scientists). But if it has remained among the humanities, in the company of the study of literature, art, and philosophy and not that of sociology or political science, I suspect it is ultimately because of some sense that science deals with regularities—if not with "laws," then at the very least with things that are to some degree predictable—and that history tends to focus on the very opposite, on the irregular and the unpredictable, on events that could no more be predicted, before they happened, than the production of a novel or a work of art.

For some, I will allow, this might seem a rather old-fashioned view of history. Certainly, not all modern historians feel their discipline should even be among the humanities; there are many proponents of a "science of history"—one which can make predictions. In ways the debate within history parallels the one in anthropology. Much of the literature about the nature of narrative which I made use of in the introduction to chapter 6, in fact, emerges from just such a debate (Rosaldo 1989:127–143 provides a useful summary), in which a set of historians and philosophers of history, having been told that no one had any reason to take them seriously as long as they were simply telling stories and not coming up with any generalizable laws, ended up formulating a defense of "narrative understanding" as an alternate, and perfectly legitimate, way of knowing. I am, as the reader might imagine, sympathetic to their position. In fact, I would take the argument much further. It seems to me that, at least in anthropology, it is this very concern with science, laws, and

regularities that has been responsible for creating the sense of distance I have been trying so hard to efface; it is, paradoxically enough, the desire to seem objective that has been largely responsible for creating the impression that the people we study are some exotic, alien, ultimately unknowable Other.

Let me provide a few examples of what I mean by this.

European documents concerning Madagascar written before the French conquest are remarkably different in tone than those written afterward. I remember being quite struck by this while doing research in the Malagasy archives. It seemed as if in 1895, the whole character of the country changed. The Madagascar one reads about in nineteenth-century documents was a place crowded with individuals: politicians, princesses, humble rural pastors or wandering sorcerers, bandits, generals, Christian martyrs. Documents by missionaries, European agents, and travelers were all the same in this respect, even political dispatches tended to taken up with speculation about the motivations, affinities, and likely plans of government ministers or potential revolutionaries. The authors were full of all sorts of biases, and most of the portraits are pretty two-dimensional, but at least they were usually making a sincere effort to understand the motives of the people about whom they were writing, for the simple reason that they had to. After all, they were visitors in an independent country, and these were people with some power to affect their lives. Almost the moment Madagascar lost its independence, the individuals vanish. Documents from the colonial period consist either of vague, descriptive generalities, or (even more) of tedious accounts of administration, along with scientific dispatches and reports.

Margaret Weiner (1995) notes much the same transformation in comparing records from before the Dutch conquest of southern Bali in 1908 to those which came after it; after conquest, accounts of personalities and dramatic events are immediately replaced by bureaucratic "discussions of finance, agricultural production, construction, and public health. It was," she writes, "as if once a region was brought under colonial domination, nothing happened there any longer. . . . The colonial state produced knowledge mainly in the form of statistics and regularities" (Weiner 1995:90).

One reason why individuals disappear from colonial documents is, clearly, because the authors were no longer obliged to take account of them; one of the first things a colonial regime tends to do is to create a political climate in which no single inhabitant of the country is in a position to do anything which could have much of an effect on them. But it was also because they conceived of

what they were doing, their mode of rule, in very scientific terms. Hence the "statistics and regularities." Colonial governments saw themselves as applying techniques of scientific administration, which could bring the country's economy and society as much as possible under complete, predictable control, and in doing so establish the very parameters within which meaningful action was possible.

But—at least in Madagascar—there was another side to this story. It was also precisely at the moment when the country had been conquered, and these rational-bureaucratic techniques of administration were being put in place, that the new administrators began waxing poetic (in their unofficial writings) about something they called the "Malagasy soul." This "Malagasy soul" soon became a stock theme of French writing on the island. It was represented as the sign of a profoundly alien mentality, full of quirky passions and dreamy fantasies, ultimately beyond the grasp of the understanding of a simple Westerner. As Antoine Bouillon (1981) points out, no one had ever talked this way when Madagascar was independent, and foreign visitors still had to deal with individual Malagasy actors on anything like equal terms.

This is a useful example, I think, because it's so obvious what's going on here. The "Malagasy soul"—in so far as it was anything more than projection—was a mere byproduct, a confused amalgam of everything that fell outside the extremely narrow parameters set by the authors' own bureaucratic machinery or the rationalistic regimes which they now had the power to impose.

Modern anthropology, of course, took shape mainly within the British and French colonial empires as well. And it too considered itself a scientific enterprise.

This was the age of Structural Functionalism, and one of the main things that made Structural Functionalist anthropology scientific, in the eyes of its practitioners, was the fact that it was concerned primarily with "norms," or regularities. What this meant in practice was that what ethnographers described, and theorists discussed, was almost exclusively those aspects of social life which were predictable, repetitive: the human life cycle, with its age grades and rites of passage, the domestic cycle, ritual cycles, yearly rounds . . . Even succession to political office was always treated this way. In so far as individuals and unique events appeared in ethnographies written at this time, they would usually take the form of case studies meant to illustrate more general processes. Here and there, there were efforts to try to find some way of talking about individual projects and intentions (names like Max Gluckman

and Victor Turner come most immediately to mind) but it was with the underlying assumption, one could almost call it faith, that individual actors were ultimately irrelevant, that whatever their immediately intentions, they would somehow end up reproducing the same cyclic structure over and over again.

Of course, it was easier to think of such people as living outside of history because, for the most part, they were people living under foreign military occupation, with no political rights. But as time went on, Western observers developed an increasing tendency to confuse causes with effects. Rather than the absence of history being an effect of the way the authors chose to describe these societies, it was the result of something profoundly strange about the societies themselves. These were societies that had rejected history: "cold cultures" (Levi-Strauss 1966), exotic societies locked in a primal, mythic consciousness. And what did this mythic consciousness consist of? Regularities. Eternal repetition. The faith that everything comes in unchanging cycles, a "traditionalist" philosophy that actively rejects history, personal idiosyncrasies, the future, and cumulative change in the name of timeless archetypes and the "eternal return" (e.g., Eliade 1954).

It is probably only fair to point out such doctrines tended to put forward most enthusiastically by people who had only *read* ethnographies, not ones who had written them. But still, notice what is happening. The very attitude which Western observers adopt in the name of science ends up being projected onto those they observe; except there, instead of making them seem like scientists, it makes them seen mystical, poetic, strange, profoundly different sorts of human being.

Since the dissolution of colonial empires, anthropologists have rediscovered history. But something of the old attitude remains. There is still a sense that, in order to be considered objective, one must deny certain aspects of the subjectivity of those one studies. Few ethnographies even attain the level of personal engagement one senses in some of most interesting dispatches and reports to be found in precolonial European archives. Indeed, I suspect it is just this sort of denial which is ultimately responsible for the fact that critics can still write of anthropology being basically about drawing the boundaries between an "us" and "them" (Trinh Minh-Ha 1989), to speak as if its fundamental business has always, and must necessarily be, to describe some deeply alien creature—usually referred to as "the Other"—so different from the anthropologist and her audience that anything one says about them is likely to be a mere a projection of one's own self (see Said 1982; JanMohammed

1985:59, Spivak 1988, Trouillot 1991, for but a handful of examples).[2] Again, anthropologists themselves do not often talk this way; it is mainly those who have merely read our books who talk about "the Other." I myself can't think of anyone I know who has actually lived and worked for any length of time with people of a profoundly different culture who left with the impression that they were—to take one extreme formulation—"so foreign that they leave me reluctant to admit they belong to the same species as my own" (Todorov 1982:3).

Obviously, then, by the time of writing, something is falling out. In the field, anthropologists have no trouble recognizing the people we work with as fellow human beings. But somehow, whatever it was that made them so recognizable is not coming through in our descriptions.

Perhaps this is not so surprising, considering what some of these points of recognition are. In my own case, for instance, the most obvious thing which made it impossible to think of the people I met in Madagascar as being profoundly different sorts of human being was the fact that they were all so different from each other. And not only that, the ways they were different from each other seemed pretty much the same as the ways people were different from each other anywhere else I'd ever been. From the moment I started having any sort of prolonged social interaction with people, I found myself sizing them up as individuals: "Person A seems to be basically well meaning, but she's incredibly self-involved, the sort of person who always feels her life is in a total crisis, tottering on the brink of tragedy; Person B, something dishonest about that guy, like he's always trying to figure out the angles, wouldn't trust him further than I could throw him; Person C, optimistic, playful but probably not incredibly dependable; Person D, an insensitive, loudmouth jerk . . ." It is not hard to see why such assessments tend to get left out of ethnographies. Even apart from the last one (anthropologists have a particularly hard time admitting they could have possibly met anyone in the field who they disliked), it all seems hopelessly subjective. Even a very brief list such as I have just presented would probably inspire some critic to demand to know why they should not think I was simply projecting my own English language categories where they were entirely inappropriate. It would not be a particularly fair criticism; first of all, because such assessments often involved impressions one could not remotely put into words—and often even the words one used were obviously inadequate, just makeshift approximations that stood in for a much more intuitive sense of what someone seemed to be

about. Anyway, the more I got used to using Malagasy, the more I started substituting Malagasy words for English, without ever feeling I was crossing any great divide.[3] But more important, I think, that criticism gives the sense that what one is doing is some kind of abstract parlor game, placing familiar categories on unfamiliar objects, and this is utterly untrue. Making such assessments is no game. It is an absolutely inevitable and necessary feature of human interaction. You have to do it because you have to have some idea how people are likely to behave, because their behavior, their actions, are likely to have effects on you, or at the very least have effects on your friends, or people that you like or care about. Often they are based on very immediate concerns, like: what would it be like to spend five or six hours stuck in the back of a truck with this person? Would they at least be interesting to talk to? Would they want to talk to me at all? What's the chance they would spend the time trying to convert me to their religion, or to seduce me, or get drunk and throw up on me? For this reason, too, these assessments are also constantly being tested against reality. One often gets it wrong—sometimes, disastrously wrong. Often—especially at first—one misreads the cues because of cultural differences. But sometimes it is just because it is in the nature of such assessments that they are often wrong. And even after years of being tested by daily interaction, no one's knowledge of anyone else can ever be quite complete or accurate, it always remains something of an approximation; people will always retain their capability to surprise you.

It seems to me that one of the prime reasons such assessments get left out of ethnographies—even most self-consciously experimental ones—is simply because making them implies a recognition that these are people who have—or have had—some power to affect the ethnographer's life. Obviously, people who are living together, engaged in common projects, or even just in the habit of engaging in conversation are going to have some kind of effect on one another. But for some reason, ethnographers tend to find the reciprocal aspects of such relations embarrassing. One is allowed to meditate guiltily about the possible ill effects of one's own actions, for instance, but in writing, the other side of the picture tends to get swept away. In the end, the effect is to create a kind of invisible wall, which seems to prevent the people in the book from having any historical agency, any ability to have an effect on the ethnographer and her world,[4] without, however, preventing influence to flow the other way around. By blotting out the traces of character, it effaces even the impressions which recognition of a capacity to affect others' lives will always, necessarily leave behind.

In part, this is probably just an effect of the conditions under which people write, which are generally very different than the conditions under which they conducted their research. Most ethnographers write their books safely tucked away in universities far away from the people they are writing about. By then, those people are usually no longer in a position to do anything that will have an immediate effect on them or anyone close to them—although the reverse is not necessarily the case. Most ethnographers do spend a great deal of time fretting over the possible effects their writing might have—as I, for example, have worried endlessly over whether I am betraying my friend Armand by publishing information that indicates his ancestors were slaves. It is hard to imagine anything Armand might do, now, that would have any real effect on me. It would hardly be surprising if that reality (which is, after all, the encompassing reality) often tends to be projected back into the way we write about the very different experience of fieldwork.

A Small Anti-Relativist Diatribe

I think it's important to consider this possibility because it suggests how often the invisible walls that appear in our texts are really only made possible by the existence of other walls that are perfectly visible—in this case, of a very large and elaborate apparatus of exclusion which involves such elements as international treaties, border guards, the price of airplane tickets, and the IMF. Politics does not take place primarily within texts, though one might not know it from some of the more abstract debates about the "politics of representation."

Consider for example the doctrine of moral relativism. By this I mean the doctrine that, starting from the (entirely reasonable) premise that one cannot fully understand any action except in the context of the actor's cultural universe, concludes that as a consequence, no one has the right to stand in judgment over any action committed by someone with a fundamentally different world view. Now it seems to me this is a doctrine that could only really emerge as a product of imperialism. It could only have been produced by members of an elite population whose dominance over the world was so complete and so reliable that they could live their lives in full confidence that no one with a fundamentally different world view would ever be in a position of power over them. When you find someone arguing that no Westerner has the right to find fault in, say, the cultural presumption that an appropriate response to grief at the death of a close member of one's family is to waylay and

kill some random stranger, they can only do so because of the existence of complex and very efficient systems of control, involving armies, police, passports, airport security, immigration laws, and structures of economic inequality, which make it almost inconceivable that anyone who felt that this was an appropriate response to grief would ever end up living in *their* neighborhood, or be in striking distance of their children.[5] Pretenses to some kind of moral superiority, based on their unwillingness to morally condemn "the Other," it seems to me, are often entirely underpinned by tacit support for real walls to shut real other people out. And by refusing to consider someone as a moral person, one provides a perfect justification to continue to exclude them.

What I am ultimately getting at is that the very least an ethnographer (or anyone else) owes to people they write about is to represent them in such a way that the reader can recognize them as human beings who (as I said earlier) they might not know, but they could know, as people who have at least the potential to inhabit the same moral universe as she. It means recognizing them as people with the capacity to make history.[6]

Not that the mere act of writing this way is itself going to solve all that many problems. No one was ever liberated inside a text, least of all within a text they did not write. Recognizing the fact that people have the capacities to be historical agents does not itself make it any easier for them to go out and make history. People do not live in texts. Most of the ones in this book, for example, live in Madagascar. There many had, when I knew them, managed to wrest a remarkable degree of autonomy for themselves, but are also very poor, had little access to any worldwide networks of influence and communication, in fact, next to no means to affect anything that happened outside of Madagascar. Nor has their situation changed dramatically in the intervening ten years or so. Writing about them with more sensitivity is not likely to do much to improve this situation, though it certainly wouldn't hurt.

The Capacity to Make History

My argument, so far, has much in common with an argument developed by S. P. Mohanty (1989) about the political implications of relativism. Mohanty too argues that adopting an extreme relativist position would be politically disastrous: what basis would we have to criticize the structures of power in the world, unless we at least admit that everyone in the world shares certain things in common? At the very least, he suggests, we have to recognize that

we by now all inhabit a common history (not a series of separate, culturally bounded "histories"), and that we all share a "capacity for self-aware historical agency" (1989:74), which makes us capable of participating in it. All this seems eminently reasonable to me. But one might still reasonably ask: what precisely does this capacity for historical agency consist of? What *is* "historical agency," anyway?

The terms I've been laying out over the course of the last several pages suggest at least one possible answer. "Historical actions," one might say, "are actions which could not have been predicted before they happened." Or, if that is too simple, then: "actions considered memorable afterwards because they could not have been predicted beforehand."[7] History, then, is the record of those actions which are *not* simply cyclical, repetitive, or inevitable.

As with my definition of political action in chapter 6, I am trying to be intentionally provocative—ignoring almost everything that's already been written on the subject, and proposing an alternative so simple that it might even be considered simplistic. Some readers will no doubt object that the definitions I propose for both "politics" and "history" are so broad that they threaten to make the terms almost meaningless—leaving no way to distinguish a family quarrel and a revolution or a civil war. Perhaps. But this kind of breadth also has its advantages. It makes it possible to think of politics (and history) as something intrinsic to the nature of social life, even of ordinary, daily interaction; to think of it as something which everyone is always doing, not just the powerful; that engaging in politics or making history does not have to involve preventing anyone else from doing so. In other words, rather than assuming that power and exclusion are intrinsic the very nature of politics, it allows one to at least imagine a politics and a history that could still be going on without them.

These definitions have other implications as well. If it is really true (as Mohanty suggests) that what makes us human is above all our capacity to make history, and if history consists of actions that could not have been predicted beforehand, then that would mean that the fundamental measure of our humanity lies in what we *cannot* know about each other. To recognize another person as human would then be to recognize the limits of one's possible knowledge of them. Their humanity is inseparable from their capacity to surprise us.

In a way, this fits quite well with what I was saying about why anthropologists are able to recognize they are not dealing with a fundamentally different sort of being. The constant process of assessing other peoples' characters, which I suggested is an inevitable feature of any relation between people, are

so many innumerable imperfect ways of approximating something that is ultimately can not be known: how exactly that person is likely to behave. (Character, noted Aristotle, emerges from action.) But this is why for all they are necessarily partial, flawed—like bits of cloth pasted over something that's invisible—they nonetheless seem to convey such an immediate sense of common humanity.

Writing

At this point I can return briefly to the question of style.

This book contains a number of little dialogues, ranging from simple two-way conversations between myself and one other person, to scenes in which sometimes as many as four or five different people discuss some issue with each other as I simply sat and let the tape recorder run. In translating these dialogues, I did my best convey something of the speaker's personalities, tone, and general attitude—but usually, provided very little in the way of setting, context, how these people had come to be talking around my tape recorder. Dialogues like this are slightly unusual in modern ethnographic writing, but hardly something new. Still, when I showed such texts to fellow anthropologists, they would often be slightly dubious. "Ah, but how can you know what these people were really thinking," or "How can you know everything that's really going on during such a conversation?" It was said in such a way as to imply that there was something very inadequate about such information if one could not know everything they were thinking. At first the reaction took me quite aback. It had never occurred to me one would even be able to know the full motivations of all the speakers in *any* conversation. It was not even clear what it would mean to. And even if had some way of knowing that one of the one of the participants in, say, a transcribed conversation about *Vazimba* was leaving out some embarrassing detail, or was desperately trying to impress a woman across the room he had fallen in love with—or for that matter was wondering about what kind of price he would get for my tape recorder if he stole it—what would be the point of including this information? It would not have much bearing on the subject of *Vazimba*. I had assumed that the very act of reproducing the conversation in relatively colloquial language would be enough to convey to the reader a sense that none of these voices are absolutely authoritative, that everything said is at least a little incomplete, slanted, and subjective—which is all any further details would have demonstrated anyhow.

James Clifford (1980, 1986, 1988) has insisted that ethnographic knowledge is always, by its nature incomplete and partial, and I will agree that it is a bit disturbing that this point ever had to be made, that it was not always considered self-evident. Since Clifford's work, and the "crisis of representation" which shook anthropology in the 1980s, anthropologists have become used to thinking critically about the process by which ethnographic knowledge is constructed. This—along with a (equally postmodern) concern with the dynamics of social strategies and maneuvering—is, of course, the real context for my friends' reaction to those dialogues, the urge to immediately start reflecting over the political dynamics that probably lie behind them. Anyone who has read this book will be well aware that I myself am not entirely unconcerned with such questions. But what was really striking was the urge to understand everything, the sense that simply reproducing what was said, with a few telling details to give context, was somehow deceptive. To write in a way which takes for granted that one would never be able to reveal everything, that art is the art of selecting details, is perhaps the hallmark of a literary sensibility. But at moments like this the postmodern sensibility—for all it draws its inspiration from literary theory—seems to move in precisely the opposite direction, and ends up slipping into a kind of perverse, extreme scientism: as if it were only if one could know that precisely what everyone was thinking, every hidden strategy at play, that we could have real knowledge.[8] Not surprising then that many conclude that real knowledge is impossible.

To me the issue is not whether this sort of knowledge is possible (it obviously isn't) but why anyone would even want it. Would anyone really want to live in a world where it was possible to have this kind of total and encompassing knowledge of another human being? By the definitions I've been developing in particular, it would be the ultimate dehumanization.

My own argument is that rather than seeing the limits of our knowledge as a problem, it would be much better to see it as the best basis on which to build a broader sense of human commonality. If nothing else, it would not be an ethnocentric one, prone to the usual criticisms that it was nothing but a projection of a very particular Western idea of the rational subject. In fact, I doubt it would be possible to find another cultural tradition that even entertains the fantasy that it might be possible to have such comprehensive knowledge of others.

To say this is not to claim that people are not products of their cultures, of social and historical forces beyond their understanding, only to say that

they are not entirely so—and also, that it is this fact that ensures that such forces are not entirely beyond our understanding, they are not unknowable in the same ultimate sense as people are. Let me give an example of what I mean. I once asked Chantal why it was that, even though everyone insisted *famadihana* were supposed to be a happy occasions, every time I went to one, at least one woman broke down in tears. She seemed rather taken aback, and asked how I would feel if someone put my father's decomposing body on my lap. Here was a Malagasy woman, and one who knew me rather well, reduced for the moment to wondering whether I might not really be some sort of bizarre, alien Other after all, simply by the thought that maybe I *wouldn't* be emotionally traumatized by such an experience. It was not the only time I had seen Malagasy women discuss whether non-Malagasy really had the same depth of emotions as they did, whether they really loved and cared for each other and their families with the same intensity, whether (by implication) they were really quite as human. I had apparently touched off a familiar prejudice. But these same people—Chantal included—were in other contexts equally capable of holding out the fact that Malagasy people did, in fact, place decomposing bodies on each other's laps as part of the essence of what made them Malagasy (and me, who had never done this, again, a profoundly different sort of human being). Both—identities based on the universality of certain emotional reactions, and those based on cultural traditions—are equally constructed. I am not suggesting that we should base our sense of what is fundamentally human on one and not the other. What I am suggesting is that we should base it on whatever it is—that invisible point—that is capable of pivoting back and forth between the two. On whatever it is (in this case marked by the name "Chantal") that is able to try on such identities, then hold them out and look at them from more of a distance, in the process of trying to define herself by defining her relation to other human beings. It is also what makes it possible for us to create culture—which is something everyone is always doing, since culture is nothing more than the process of its own creation—and which makes it possible to use what we know of how that process of creation tends to work in order to understand cultures we have not, ourselves personally, had role in creating. Which is what makes it possible for there to be disciplines like anthropology. I might never be able to completely understand Chantal—any more than I will ever be able to completely understand anyone else—but that which makes it impossible for either of us to completely understand the other is also what makes us both capable of sitting

down together and trying to make some generalizations about our respective societies and cultures.[9]

I have already noted the Malagasy tendency to represent the source of human intentions and agency—spirits, ghosts, the soul—as something hidden, invisible, hence which cannot be ultimately known.[10] This is actually a very common way of representing things. As I have noted elsewhere (Graeber 1996), it appears all over the world in conceptions of that aspect of the person which ethnographers most often refer to, in English, as "the soul"—what Tyler called the "life soul"—the hidden seat of human intentionality which gives us the capacity to act. Even where there is explicit metaphysical theory, people do take it for granted that one cannot ever know really know what another person is likely to do; and usually, that it is from this unknowable place—in the heart, the head, the throat, the liver, wherever one happens to place it—that actions, ideas, new unpredictable things emerge.

Edmund Leach (1982:108) once suggested that what unites all human beings is not that they are in possession of an immortal soul, but they are capable of imagining that they are. Perhaps (aside from the part about "immortality") these are really not such altogether different things.

Glossary of Malagasy Terms

Ambalavelona [am-ba-la-VEL-n(a)]: a "disease" caused by possession by a malicious ghost, caused by witchcraft and often treated by spirit mediums.

Anatra [AH-na-tr(a)]: admonitions (the verb is *mananatra*). A classic way of conveying ancestral authority.

Andevo [an-DAY-v(oo)]: normally translated "slave." It is something of a bad word, most people prefer euphemisms like "servant" (*mpanompo*), "soldier" (*miaramila*), "serf " (*menakely*), etc.

Andriana [an-DREE-n(a)]: normally translated "noble," the word refers to the Sovereign and members of any ancestry

Deme: Maurice Bloch's term for endogamous Merina ancestries that are tied to specific ancestral territories. They have no generic name in Malagasy so I have retained Bloch's usage.

Doany [DWAN]: said to be from the French word for "customs office." A sanctuary for royal spirits where they can be "made sacred" (see *manasina*), vows can be made, thanks rendered, and mediums possessed.

Fady [FAD]: taboo. Something one is forbidden to eat or do. Often the result of ancestral ozona, or "cursing." Pork and garlic are frequent objects of *fady*.

Fahaizana [fa-AY-za-n(a)]: skills, know-how, practical knowledge, often used either for foreign technological knowledge of Malagasy knowledge of *fanafody*.

Famadihana [fa-ma-DEE-a-n(a)]: literally "turning." A ritual, held in the winter, when all the descendants of the ancestors in a particular tomb or set of tombs assemble to hold the dead on their laps and then rewrap them in new shrouds. These are probably the most important, and certainly the most expensive, ancestral ritual in the area around Arivonimamo.

Fanafody [fa-na-FOO-d(ee)]: medicine. The term can refer to anything from an herbal infusion to cure a stomachache to a collection of beads and scraps of wood invoked to bring lightning on the heads of one's enemies.

Fanahy [fa-NAY]: "soul," or "character."

Fanampoana [fa-nam-POW-n(a)]: "service." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term was used for the obligations all free citizens (*hova* and most *andriana*) owed to the sovereign, and only secondarily to the obligations slaves owed to their masters. Since the colonial era the two have tended to collapse together in the popular imagination; especially since *mpanompo* ("servant") has become a euphemism for slavery.

Fanasinana. See *Manasina.*

Fanekena [fa-nay-KAY-n(a)]: "agreement," either in the sense of a formal contract, or agreement by a community to live by certain principles, or more broadly to a general state of concord existing in a community.

Fatidra [fat-DRA]: "blood brotherhood," a common form of agreement from Malagasy times to the present.

Firaisan-kina [fi-RAY-san-Kee-n(a)]: "unity of purpose"

Fitsitsihina (or *tsiska*) [fee-tsee-TSEE-a-n(a)]: an ordeal or ritual designed to establish guilt or expel evildoers through appeals to ancestral power and the pronouncement of imprecations. They are sometimes held at standing stones called *vato fitsitsihina,* "stones of imprecation." There was a revival of such traditions in the area around Arivonimamo in the '80s and '90s.

Fokon'olona [foo-koon-OOL-n(a)]: an assembly of everyone concerned with a particular issue, in order to make decisions through a process of consensus. Governments since the time of the Merina kingdom have tended to treat "the *fokon'olona*" as a formal institution or village council and attempted, usually unsuccessfully, to turn it into the base unit of administration.

Fokontany [fook-TAN(ee)]: the smallest Malagasy administrative division. Betafo consisted of two *fokontany.* The eastern one had its offices in Belanitra.

Fotsy [FOO-ts(ee)]: "white," a term often used for those of either *hova* or *andriana* descent.

Hasina [AH-si-n(a)]: a kind of force or power that operates through imperceptible means to achieve perceptible results. Ancestors, spirits, and medicine all have *hasina. Hasina* can be created, conveyed, built up, but also undermined or destroyed, by ritual means. The adjectival form, *masina,* is usually translated "sacred."

Hova [OO-v(a)]: the main class of free people under the Merina kingdom. Usually translated "commoner," to distinguish them from *andriana* ("nobles").

Kabary [ka-BAR-(ee)]: a much-appreciated genre of formal oratory. Elders really ought to be good at *kabary* but they rarely are.

Kalanoro [ka-la-NOO-r(oo)]: diminutive legendary creatures that can provide enormous wealth, but are also enormously demanding of their owners.

Kianja [kee-AN-dz(a)]: an open space for public meetings

Lolo [LOO-loo]: "ghost," or any invisible spirit. It's also the word for "butterfly."

Mainty [MAY-nt(ee)]: lit. "black." Originally applied to certain specialized warrior demes and other royal servants, it became, since the late nineteenth century, a generic word in Imerina for the descendants of slaves, and other non-Merina Malagasy.

Malabary [ma-la-BA-r(ee)]: a long shirt, with buttons only halfway down, that is the traditional male attire in rural Imerina.

Manasina [ma-NA-si-n(a)]: to "make something *masina*" or "give something *hasina*" (qv). Rituals directed to *Vazimba*, or royal spirits that possess mediums, are always called this. In fact just about all non-life cycle rituals fall under this category.

Masiaka [ma-SEE-ky(a)]: "fierce, violent, or cruel." Often used of ancestors who are strict or arbitrarily vindictive.

Menakely [may-na-KEL-(ee)]: territories assigned to important aristocrats or the descendants of former local rulers under the Merina kingdom. The word could also be used for the inhabitants of those territories, who owed them various forms of *fanampoana*.

Mpamosavy [pam-SAV]: "witch," either in the sense of someone who uses medicine for malicious purposes, or "witches who go out at night," horrific creatures of great power and utter depravity, usually thought to be seduce by their own love medicine.

Mpanandro [pan-AND-r(oo)]: an astrologer, expert in the application of a system based on the Arabic lunar calendar.

Mpomasy [poo-MAS-(ee)]: a curer, and expert in medicine (*fanafody*). Most are either astrologers, or *Zanadrano*, or both.

Ody [OO-d(ee)]: "charms," individual items of medicine. *Ody fitia* is "love medicine" and *ody havandra* are "hail charms."

Olona Fotsy [OOL-n(a) FOO-ts(see)]: "white people," see *fotsy.*

Olona Mainty [OOL-n(a) MAY-nt(ee)]: "black people," see *mainty.*

Ozona [OO-zoo-n(a)]: "cursing." The ultimate recourse of ancestral power, as well as the means of imposing ancestral taboos.

Ray amand-Reny [RI-am-an-DRAY-n(ee)]: literally "fathers and Mmothers," the word for elders. There was always a certain argument over who, in a rural community, really qualified as an elder. The few names everyone would agree on were always people who had recently died.

Razambe [ra-zam-BAY]: "great ancestor," the founder of a line of community, or the most important body in a tomb.

Razana [RA-za-n(a)]: "ancestor," also, properly treated corpse deposited in a tomb.

Tantara [tan-TA-r(a)]: "history," also "story."

Sampy [SAM-p(ee)]: certain very important *ody* that protected whole families, demes, or territories in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The missionaries identified them as "idols," and now *mpanompo sampy,* "to serve the idols," is the local word for "heathen." Since everyone in rural Imerina claimed at least nominal allegiance to Christianity, no one wished to admit such things continued to exist. However, at least in the Arivonimamo area, th-century *sampy* seem to have been renamed *ody havandra,* or "hail charms.

Vazaha [va-ZA]: "foreigners," particular French foreigners, or "Westerners."

Vazimba [va-DZIM-b(a)]: ancestors lost to their tombs and descendants, who descend into watery places where they become amoral and dangerous but powerful spirits. They can be propitiated and turned into sources of personal power by the unscrupulous. They are also sometimes seen, particularly in literary texts, as a kind of aboriginal population of Imerina, since displaced.

Zanadrano [dza-na-DRA-n(oo)]: spirit mediums who take part in the rituals for the various "royal spirits" (*andriana masina*) whose sanctuaries dot the various mountains of Imerina, and use them to cure the victims of witchcraft. Mediums are overwhelmingly the descendants of slaves.

Personal Names in Text

This is not meant to be a comprehensive list, but provided for the convenience of the reader. Characters only mentioned in one section of the text, for instance, are not included for this reason.

Andriamaharo: *andriana* of Antahasoa, Betafo. The "head of 100," or local administrator of *fanompoana*, in Betafo in the mid-nineteenth century. He is also said to have been the owner of the local hail charm ("Leafy One," or Ravololona), and founder of the Protestant church. It is he who is said to have had a famous conflict with Rainitamaina.

Andriamasoandro: ancestor of the deme directly to Betafo's west. They were descended from the royal lines of the old Imamo kingdom, and traditional rivals of the Andrianamboninolona of Betafo.

Andriamboninolona: ancestor of the 5th grade of nobility in the old Merina kingdom, distant ancestor of the population of Betafo.

Andrianambololona: legendary founder of Betafo in the eighteenth century. Of the noble ancestry of the Andrianamboninolona (q.v.) His tomb is in the middle of *tampon-tanana*, and his name "Lord Leafy One" is the same as the hail charm, Ravololona.

Andrianampoinimerina: the ruler who unified the warring principalities of the northern highlands to create the Merina kingdom at the very end of the eighteenth century.

Andriantonga: *andriana* of *tampon-tanana*, Betafo. Of Betafo's most prominent family at the time, he became a local administrator under the French, and a notoriously demanding and abusive one.

Andriantsihanika: ancestor of the "Zanak'Antitra," perhaps the most famous ancestry in the region west of the capital. His descendants are scattered throughout the region but especially concentrated in Amboanana. He is said to have willingly given up *andriana* status to become a commoner. His tomb, between Antananarivo and Arivonimamo, is a major site of pilgrimage and his spirit is often invoked by *Zanadrano*.

Armand: *mainty* of Andrianony and Arivonimamo, eldest son of Ranaivo the Bolt, and after his premature death the effective head of one of Andrianony's more energetic and prosperous lineages. He attended college at Ankatso in the capital and was engaged in the banana business, as well as being active in a local Trotskyite political movement (the MFM).

Augustin: *mainty*, prominent political figure of Betafo (Andrianony), had been *President Fokontany* at the age of 32 (hence his nickname Ikoto Prez, or "Kid President") with the ruling party AREMA. Managed most of the fields of absentee *andriana*, especially after his successful destruction of his principle rival Sely.

Chantal: young woman from Arivonimamo, currently engaged in her year of "national service," who became one of my effective research assistants.

Claude: *andriana* of *tampon-tanana* Betafo. Husband of Miadana, son of Elizabeth. One of the few scions of the famous lines of *tampon-tanana andriana* to actually return to Betafo, having been forced to retire early from a civil service job owing to a series of stomach operations.

Dada Leva: *mainty* of Kianja, a village not far from Betafo. An elderly astrologer, he is the favored curer from *andriana* suspicious of Ratsizafy, and Ratsizafy's declared rival.

Damien (a.k.a. Dami): *andriana* of *tampon-tanana* Betafo, eldest son of Miadana and Claude.

Elizabeth: *andriana* of Antananarivo, mother of Claude. Of one of Betafo's most prominent *andriana* families, she rarely visits Betafo itself.

Haingo: *andriana* of Andrianony, Betafo. The eldest daughter of Miadana and Claude, she is married to Norbert's son Soanaivo.

Ingahibe. *See* Ratsizafy.

Ingahirainy: *mainty* of Andrianony, Betafo, and perhaps the only person in Betafo who is universally conceded to be an elder; though he is also said to be shy and dislikes to play too much of a public role.

Irina: *andriana* of Antanety, Betafo. Daughter of Ramanana, one of the more prominent in her suspicions of Ratsizafy.

Jean-Marie: *mainty* of Andrianony, Betafo. Of the same lineage as Augustin, he is also a close friend and ally of their family.

Juliette: *mainty* of Andrianony, Betafo. Wife of Norbert. Suspected of horrible things, especially by Miadana's family.

Lailoza: A legendary ancient ruler of Imamo, or according to others, merely the son of a ruler, who oppressed his subjects and was ultimately destroyed by his own father. Since his death he has become more benevolent and his tomb atop mount Ambohitrambo is still a place of pilgrimage and mediumship. Rainibe appears to be a medium of Lailoza. Some feel there is a connection between him and Betafo's *andriana*.

Manambe: the wealthiest man in the region around Arivonimamo. He is also the most famous client of Ratsizafy, and relies on him for a variety of protection medicine. Widely rumored to have a *Kalanoro*.

Mariel: Betafo's schoolteacher. An *andriana* from another part of Imerina.

Miadana: *andriana*, *tampon-tanana* Betafo. Wife of Claude, and matriarch of one of the most prominent family of *andriana* returnees to the ancestral lands there. Having lived most of her life in the capital, she is unused to rural ways, and was enthusiastic about communicating everything she herself had to figure out about rural life.

Narcisse: *andriana*, *tampon-tanana* Betafo. Younger son of Miadana and Claude.

Nety: *mainty*, of Andrianony, Betafo, and Arivonimamo. Wife of Armand.

Nivo: *andriana*, *tampon-tanana* Betafo. A younger daughter of Miadana and Claude.

Noely: according to many at least, *mainty*, Morafeno, Betafo. The younger of Ratsizafy's two sons, and an accomplished expert in medicine in his own right.

Norbert: *mainty*, Andrianony, Betafo. One of the most notorious opponents of the *andriana* of Betafo.

Pano: according to many at least, *mainty*, Morafeno, Betafo. The oldest son of Ratsizafy and purportive heir to the hail medicine.

Rahoby: the main living descendant of Rakotonarivo Auguste, the last occupant of the mansion of Atsimonkady. An engineer based in the capital but who worked frequently in France, he briefly conceived an abortive project of rebuilding the mansion. He died in France during the time I was in Betafo and was buried in the *Telo Milahatra*.

Rainibe: *mainty* of Anjakalambo, Betafo. Patriarch of an extended family there, widely rumored to be a *Zanadrano* (medium) and to propitiate his own *Vazimba* spirit in the nearby rice fields.

Rajaona: *andriana* of Belanitra, Betafo. The *President Fokontany* in 1990.

Rakoto: *mainty* of Andranomadinika, the poorer, mostly *mainty*, quarter of Arivonimamo. A young curer, nephew of Ratsizafy, he has a somewhat dubious reputation as an expert in love charms. He claims that he will someday succeed to Ratsizafy's hail medicine through a "contest of skill" with his children.

Rakoto the Rat (Rakotovoalavo): *mainty* of Andrianony, Betafo. Born a slave in the nineteenth century, Rakoto appears to have had through the help of *andriana* allies in Avarakady managed to get an education through the local school and ultimately to pass into government service. He was endlessly abused by his former teacher Ralaitsivery, and finally, in 1902, hired bandits to kill him, whereon he was exiled to French Guyana.

Rakotojaona: Mariel's husband, and friend of Armand, a Trotskyite activist and promoter of craft cooperatives, temporarily located in Arivonimamo as his wife teaches in Betafo.

Rakotonarivo Auguste: *andriana* of Atsimonkady, Betafo. Widely remembered as a brilliant eccentric and amateur historian, Rakotonarivo was a descendant of one of Betafo's great families who dropped out of medical school and returned to the countryside. He died in the '70s after having sold off most of his family's inheritance.

Rakotovao: *andriana* of Antsahavory; a smith, the former pastor of Betafo and keeper of the official deme history.

Ralaitsivery: *andriana* from *tampon-tanana* Betafo. Son of Rasoavelo 6 Honors, the local constable, he was Betafo's schoolteacher and official book-keeper in the late nineteenth century. While unlike his brother Andriantonga he did not receive a government position under the French, is said to have revived the poison ordeal in the early years of French rule. In 1902 he was murdered by bandits hired by Rakoto the Rat (qv.).

Ramanana: *andriana* of Antanety, Betafo. Mother of Irina and most of the *andriana* heads of household of Antanety. Since the death of her husband probably the most important *andriana* elder of the eastern *fokontany* Betafo, though like Ingahirainy, she does not take much of a public, political role.

Ramena: *andriana* of Ambaribe, Betafo. In 1990 catechist for Betafo's Catholic community, and secretly a *Zanadrano* widely suspected of having a familiar *Vazimba* spirit. An arch-rival of Ratsizafy.

Rainitaba: *mainty* of the former settlement of Antandrok'omby, Betafo. A freed slave of long ago said, after death, to have turned into a snake and left his tomb, and ultimately, to have returned to his natal Betsileo.

Rainitamaina: the most famous of Betafo's *mainty* ancestors. According to his descendants, who include Ratsizafy and Armand, he was never actually a slave but was a wandering astrologer and purveyor of hail medicine from Betsileo, settled in Anosy, who the *andriana* of Betafo attempted, but ultimately failed, to enslave. The resulting magical battle left his family in charge of the hail medicine in the eastern part of Betafo. Ratsizafy identifies so closely with him that many actually see the two as effectively identical.

Ranaivo the Bolt (Ranaivo Karetsaka): *andriana* of Avarakady, Betafo. Often away on business, Ranaivo considers himself the keeper of the story of Rakoto the Rat and the murder of Ralaitsivery.

Ranaivo the Nail (Ranaivo le Fantsika): *mainty* of Andrianony, Betafo. Father of Armand.

Rasoavelo 6 Honors: *andriana* of *tampon-tanana* Betafo during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A minor officer in the Merina army, and later local constable, he was father of Andriantonga and Ralaitsivery and thereby, ancestor of one of its most important noble lines.

Ratsiraka: President of the Republic of Madagascar during the time covered in this book, head of the party AREMA (*Avant Garde de la Revolution Malgache*).

Ratsizafy: *mainty* of Morafeno, Betafo. Famous astrologer and curer, and keeper of Dry Rock, the hail medicine, he is perhaps Betafo's most prominent, and certainly most colorful, political figure.

Razafy: *mainty* of Anjakalambo, Betafo. Wife of Rainibe.

Razanajoary: *andriana* of Belanitra, Betafo, married to Ratsizafy, mother of Pano and Noely. Her family are Ratsizafy's main allies among Betafo's *andriana*.

Roelizaka: *andriana* of *tampon-tanana* Betafo, recently deceased. He was the last surviving resident of *tampon-tanana* who was actually born there.

Sely: *andriana* of *tampon-tanana* Betafo. Former organizer of sharecropping known for his aristocratic airs, he underwent a catastrophic fall from grace in the months immediately following the disastrous ordeal of 1987.

Soanaivo: *mainty* of Andrianony, Betafo. Eldest surviving son of Norbert, disowned. Married to Miadana's daughter Haingo.

Important Places Named in Text

Ambaribe: Settlement in the far west of Betafo's territory, and home of the bulk of the Catholic *andriana*.

Amberobe: Village that is the home of the Leafy One (Ravololona), across the mountains to the northwest of Betafo.

Amboanana: A major town and district to the immediate south of Arivonimamo, near Ankaratra. It was the origin of the first revolt of the *menalamba* in 1895.

Ambohipanompo: A large mountain to the east of the town of Arivonimamo.

Ambohidraidimby: The mountain to the immediate north of Betafo.

Ambohitrambo: A large sugar-loaf mountain north of Betafo, on its peak the tomb and sanctuary of Lailoza. The sanctuary is a site of pilgrimage and curing.

Ambohitrimaninana: A high spur of the ridge overlooking Betafo to its northeast; on it are four well-maintained tombs of Betafo's *mainty* population, the most important of which is the tomb of Rainitamaina.

Andranovelona: *Hova* village to the north of Betafo.

Andrianony: The *mainty* quarter of Betafo itself, to the northwest of *tampon-tanana*, where most of Betafo's inhabitants currently live.

Anjakalambo: A small collection of houses occupied by the descendants of Rainibe, where he is rumored to conduct his business as a medium.

Anosy: A hamlet to the south of Belanitra, the southernmost settlement in Betafo. It appears to have originally been a settlement of slaves near the rice fields, and the legendary home of Rainitamaina. It was later refounded as an *andriana* settlement, dominated by descendants of Antsahasoa, and remains so to the present day.

Antananarivo: The capital of Madagascar, about an hour's drive to the east of Arivonimamo. It is also the capital of the province of the same name, corresponding to the territory referred to in the ethnographic literature but almost never by its inhabitants as "Imerina."

Antanety: A settlement in the middle of Betafo's territory, occupied largely by the *andriana* family of Ramanana and Irina, though there is also a *mainty* settlement nearby as well.

Antsahasoa: A walled compound, now abandoned, to the west of *tampon-tanana* Betafo.

Arivonimamo: The capital of the district of the same name, an hour's west of the capital Antananarivo. A substantial town on the highway that runs west of the capital

and former home of the national airport. Betafo is a roughly forty-minute walk on unpaved roads to its north.

Atsimonkady: Literally "south of the moat." A walled compound to the immediate south of *tampon-tanana*, containing one now abandoned mansion, the former home of Rakotonarivo Auguste.

Avarakady: Literally "north of the moat." A small cluster of *andriana* houses to the north of *tampon-tanana* Betafo.

Belanitra: The largest *andriana* settlement in the eastern part of Betafo's territory, it is to the south of Betafo proper, a sprawling collection of houses on a high ridge, facing Morafeno to its east across a long valley of rice fields.

Betafo: *Andriana* settlement to the north of Arivonimamo, founded, according to legend, by an *andriana* migrant from Fieferana named Andrianambololona in the eighteenth century. "Betafo" can refer, depending on the context, either to the area in the very center of the three moats surrounding the ancestor's tomb (referred to as *tampon-tanana*), the entire area marked out by the moats, the eastern of the two *fokontany* inhabited by Andrianambololona's descendants, or to that entire territory.

Betsileo: The people inhabiting the southern part of the high plateau that runs through the center of Madagascar. The Betsileo were in the nineteenth century conquered by the Merina kingdom to their north. They since became famous as agricultural migrants. Most of Arivonimamo's *mainty* population claims descent from Betsileo.

Fieferana: A district to the north of the Malagasy capital, home of the Andrianamboninolona, or 5th order of nobility in the old Merina kingdom. The *andriana* of Betafo trace their ancestry back to this part of Imerina.

Imamo: The region to the immediate west of the heartland of the old Merina kingdom. Imamo was originally a separate kingdom, or set of kingdoms, conquered by Andrianampoinimerina. Arivonimamo was its capital.

Imerina: The northern part of the central plateau region of Madagascar, home of the Merina. Its capital is Antananarivo, seat of the Merina kingdom that conquered most of the rest of Madagascar in the nineteenth century, and the capital of the Republic of Madagascar. Rural people do not however ordinarily refer to the territory as "Imerina" but rather as the province of Antananarivo, and almost never refer to themselves as "Merina" but either generically as "Malagasy" or as inhabitants of the province of Antananarivo, or more specifically as *andriana*, *hova*, or *mainty*.

Morafeno: Small *mainty* settlement on a ridge on the far east of Betafo's territory. Mainly known as the home of Ratsizafy and his hail charm "Dry Rock."

Tampon-tanana: Literally, "top of the town." The area within the very center of the three moats surrounding the ancient settlement of Betafo, a place where only *andriana* dare to live, and some *mainty* (such as Ratsizafy) do not even set foot. It is where Miadana's family lived and the Great Ancestor Andrianambololona had his tomb.

Telo Miahatra: Literally, "Three-in-a-Row," the most prominent still active tombs in *tampon-tanana*, where the unnamed sons of Andrianambololona are buried, along with most of the most prominent of Betafo's *andriana* families.

Notes

1. Betafo, 1990

1. All Malagasy are of mixed Afro-Asian descent, but "white" Merina tend to make much of the fact they all have straight or wavy hair; *mainty,* or "black people" (who are assumed to be descended of slaves taken from the coast) do not. In fact, roughly half the black people I knew did have straight or wavy hair, so you can't necessarily tell whether someone is black or white by looking. Armand's family and friends, however, were unusually African in appearance, as certain of the snootier townspeople were fond of pointing out.

2. A *fokontany* was the smallest administrative division: this office would, in colonial times, been called "chef du village."

3. All extensive quotes that are not from written texts are my translation from the original Malagasy. The original Malagasy texts are available in an appendix to my dissertation (Graeber, 1996).

4. Combined, according to other accounts, with a driving hailstorm.

5. The way she put it also provides a nice illustration of how ancestral character becomes fused with that of their living descendants.

6. The Arivonimamo airport was given to the military, which rarely, however, had the funds to use it.

7. There are other reasons too: the sheer number of *Zanadrano*, or mediums, who tend to collect in any town the size of Arivonimamo; the fact that mediumship is organized on a regional basis with pilgrimage sites that very much follow the road network; and so on. For most of the time I was in Arivonimamo I was also living with a household headed by a noted local curer, which provided obvious advantages.

8. Miadana ultimately became a kind of research assistant in her own right; not only did she find me all sorts of documents in chests and attics in Betafo and elsewhere, she tracked down obscure bits of lore or information.

9. Actually he says "a compulsory political organization with continuous operations" that does this.

10. The way was only clear to lynch Henri, for instance, after a delegation had consulted with his father, who washed his hands of the affair.

11. The practice had fallen into desuetude for most of this century; it was undergoing a widespread revival in the '80s. I even heard rumors that some *fokon'olona* had secretly revived the use of *tangena*—the notorious poison-ordeal abandoned since the nineteenth century—though I wasn't able to confirm them.

12. In Arivonimamo there was one man with a gendarme's uniform who would occasionally rent himself out to moneylenders or merchants to intimidate people into paying

debts or surrendering collateral. An acquaintance of mine from Betafo was terrified one day when he showed up in the company of a notorious loan shark—even after his neighbors explained to him that the man could hardly be a real gendarme, because even if you could find an officer willing to trudge out into the country on such a trivial matter, lending money at interest was against the law and a real gendarme would have had more cause to arrest his creditor than he.

The case only underlines how little the forces of order cared about economic affairs; usually, there is little that irritates police more than someone impersonating an officer. It strikes at the very essence of their authority. But this impostor confined his activities to a domain in which the gendarmes had no interest. After all, the gendarmes never did anything to protect shopkeepers from Henri—and that was in town. The counterfeit officer seems to have confined his activities almost exclusively to the countryside.

13. The gendarmes' occasional zeal in pursuing bandits probably did have something to do with a perception that they were the only organized, armed group that had the capacity to form the nucleus of a rebellion—unlikely though that might have been. There had been times, mainly in the nineteenth century, when bandits actually had turned into rebels. But I suspect the concern was rooted in deeper understandings about what a state was all about: under the Merina kingdom, bandits (referred to in official documents simply as *fahavalo,* "the enemy") were, along with witches, the archetypal antistate, that which legitimate royal authority defined itself against. The connection with witches also helps explain the otherwise puzzling fact that, much though they were unconcerned with Henri's depredations, Arivonimamo's gendarmes did leap into action to arrest and interrogate a teenage girl suspected of being behind an outbreak of *Ambalavelona*, or possession by evil ghosts, which affected a whole dorm full of students at the state high school in 1979.

14. Medical services, for instance, were in theory provided free, but had been effectively privatized by corruption, which, in turn, became universal once government salaries declined to next to nothing.

15. In the West, this is more true of men than women; in Madagascar it was if anything the other way around.

16. Shaping competences in this way, in my opinion, plays a more important role in reproducing structures of inequality than any effort to inculcate ideologies through education, even the most covert. I suspect it is even more important than manipulating desires. But the way the West has conquered the world is through a conjuncture of both. Attempts to reshape the desires of a population, after all, do not really have to be effective in order to create dependent societies. The French regime in Madagascar certainly had the conscious intention of creating new needs and desires in the Malagasy population; its success was decidedly uneven. But in order to create a dependent society you do not have to transform the needs and desires of the whole population, all you absolutely have to do is transform those of the people who maintain the apparatus of coercion. I am not saying that there has ever been a society in which this is the only stratum fully integrated into the world economy—I certainly can't think of one offhand—but only that, if there were, this would be enough.

17. A few educated people—particularly Armand, and fellow members of the MFM, a party founded with the intention of creating grassroots democratic institutions—would clearly have liked to try, but proposals for creating cooperatives and similar initiatives tended to receive the same response as government initiatives had before: everyone would agree, and then go about their business as if the whole thing had never happened.

2. Royal Authority

1. Historians of Madagascar are fond of migration theories. Most assume the Merina, the inhabitants of the province sometimes called Imerina on the central plateau of Madagascar, are the product of a later wave of immigration from Malaysia, on the basis—as far as I can make out—of no evidence whatsoever, other than the fact that they tend to look rather more Asian than other Malagasy, and usually have straight hair. Myself, I see no reason why the inhabitants of the mountainous interior of the island should not look rather more like the island's original inhabitants than the populations of the coast. But this seems to be an unusual position.

2. Nowadays, no one actually calls the place "Imerina" in common speech; they refer to it by its provincial name "Antananarivo."

3. In fact, even an *ody* or *sampy*'s particular identity, its name, was not that of some particular spirit, the name by which it was appealed to in prayers was simply the name of the most important piece of wood that made it up.

4. The key word here is *manasina,* which means "to give *hasina*," "to endow something with *hasina*," or even "to create" it. (It's the closest there is to a Malagasy word for "ritual.")

5. Though, as we'll see later, the human being in question may no longer be alive.

6. "Their charms are periodically renewed by exposure to the influence of the invisible world, and anointing with castor-oil and honey, which process is followed by a rite in which a fowl or sheep is killed and offered to the powerful deities" (the latter, of course, unspecified: Haile 1893:12). *Fanasinana* is the noun describing such rituals; these were the rituals I was vainly trying to find when I first met Miadana. I note it was this action of maintaining the power of *sampy* that the missionary labeled "worship" or "adoration."

7. Imported silver coins were used as currency. For most transactions, the coins were cut up into smaller denominations, sometimes as small as a 360th of a silver dollar.

8. There were in fact a number of proverbs to this effect (Meritens & Veyrieres 1967:35–37; see Graeber 2001).

9. *Mainty* in the last century was a term applied to certain specialized demes of warriors or palace attendants considered particularly close to the royal family, who were neither *hova* (commoners) nor *andriana* but something like royal servants. It is only in the present century that the term has taken on racial implications, largely by dint of missionary influence, and come to be applied particularly to the descendants of slaves.

10. Or anyway its cognate *mpanompo,* "servant."

11. But nineteenth-century Malagasy did not really have a verb that corresponded precisely to the English "to order," or "to command." The closest, *mibaiko,* was defined in an early dictionary as "to speak words of a foreign language; to use words of command" (Richardson 1885:77)—a usage that reveals its military origin; the Merina army was originally trained by foreign advisors, and orders were always given in English or French. *Baiko,* "command," always implied something foreign and military.

12. Though most seem to think his name is Andrianamboninolona—the ancestor who gave his name to the grade of *andriana* they belong to.

13. The suggested equivalence of slave labor and wage labor is significant, as we will soon see.

14. The theme is still common, at least, in oral traditions of the Vakinankaratra (so Pier Larson, personal communication) and I am sure it is in other places as well.

15. The argument that follows is preserved in greater detail in an essay called "Love Magic and Political Morality in Central Madagascar, 1875–1990" (Graeber 1996b).

16. Most of the figures that follow draw on information in the IIICC and EE sections of the Malagasy National Archives. Figures for 1840s and 1880s Betafo can be found in chapter 6.

17. When abolitionists in England were scandalized to discover that Protestant missionaries were regularly being carried around by slaves, and hiring slaves as their domestic servants, missionaries protested that despite their best efforts they had found it impossible to find free men or women willing to work for money. (Cf. the debate in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter,* February–March 1883.)

18. I don't believe that in all the time I was in Imerina I ever heard the term used with anything but negative connotations. Apart from its political meaning, the only other phrase in which I heard it employed was the expression *fanompoana sampy* ("serving the idols")—the term adopted by the missionaries to translate the English "heathenism." The expression is only used as a term of denigration: no one, no matter how nominal their Christianity, would ever apply it to themselves.

19. Which were, remember, also called *fanompoana.*

20. In literary Malagasy, French is still known as *ny teny baiko:* "the language of command."

21. The educated, urban elite, who live their lives in a context of cash employment, have a much more accepting attitude toward relations of command. A couple of Miadana's urban relatives used to tell me casually about their "ancestors' slaves" (*andevon-drazana*), a phrase which would have shocked and embarrassed any rural dweller—including, by the time I knew her, Miadana herself.

3. Negative Authority

1. I have written on much of this in more detail in "Dancing with Corpses Reconsidered: An Interpretation of *Famadihana* (in Arivonimamo, Madagascar)," Graeber 1995.

2. In the nineteenth century these were often referred to as *foko* or *firenena.* In contemporary Imerina—or at least, around Arivonimamo—there is no generic word for such groups at all. Bloch chose the term because Merina descent groups tend to be largely endogamous—or at least to have a strong ideology of endogamy—as well as being closely identified with their ancestral territories (*tanindrazana*). The term "deme" does not seem to sit well with most other anthropologists, but since no one has suggested a viable alternative, it seems best not to clutter the literature with new terminology and to use the words that already exist.

Roughly a third of demes claim *andriana* status; the rest are considered *hova*, or "commoners." Black people, who comprise roughly a third of the Merina population, are not organized into demes per se, though in most other respects they share the same social organization as the *fotsy*, or "whites."

3. Most existing ethnography of Imerina—as opposed to historical or folkloric works—is about the relation of descent, land, and tombs (Condominas 1960, Cabanes 1967, Bloch 1971, Augustins 1973, Razafintsalama 1981, Vogel 1982). The later work of Bloch is about the only exception.

4. In fact, few people become elders during their own lifetimes: if one asked who were the most notable elders of a given community, one would almost invariably receive a list of the names of people who had recently died. For more details, and particularly about the difference between men's and women's attitudes toward ancestors, see Graeber 1995.

5. *Ohatra an'ny miavona masiaka be izy.* Some older men, however, denied the ancestor had anything to do with the fire of '31.

6. Literally "fathers and mothers," it is also the word for "parents." It is much less likely to be applied to an elderly woman than it is to an elderly man. In fact, it is only very rarely applied to a living person at all.

7. The reference to "the coin and the stone," which signifies a formal agreement or understanding, will become clearer over the course of the chapter.

8. As Nety put it (nicely paralleling what others had said about giving orders): you can curse whoever you like, but it's only when you curse a descendant that it's going to have any sort of effect on them. Though when no parent was available, the power of *ozona* could be employed by an older sibling.

9. Actually, the category "onions" (*tongolo*) also included garlic, which were referred to as "Malagasy onions" (*tongolo gasy*). Other common restrictions involved snails, goats, and certain birds.

10. For example, whenever one ate a chicken, one had to send the rump to one's parents, if they were still alive, but in describing the obligation, people would say "One cannot eat a chicken unless one has given one's parents the rump first."

11. Not considered much of a burden by most people; only a minority much cares for them.

12. In some versions Andriamasoandro dies the same way. The notion of death by gluttony crops up in other contexts as well and people always tend to find it very funny. Still, it is not unknown for people to really create *fady* based on such principles: there is a woman in Betafo, for instance, who's not allowed to eat cow's head because her grandfather is said to have choked on a piece of one and died.

13. Not long after talking to the young man who mocked his ancestors for imposing a marriage taboo between his deme and that of Andriamasoandro, I met a woman of Andriamasoandro descent who had actually violated the old *fady* had married an Andrianamboninolona. She immediately told me about the last couple who had broken the taboo: shortly after marrying, both fell ill and died. Of course, she said, she and her husband lived in Arivonimamo and not on their ancestral territories, so they probably were safe—but she certainly didn't find anything particularly amusing about the matter.

14. No one I spoke to, anyhow. But around a half century ago Mary Danielli, a teacher attached to the Quaker mission in Madagascar, found people willing to come very close to saying this in the region of Imerintsiatosika, which is only a few kilometers down the road from Arivonimamo, in the direction of the capital. There, it was commonplace to speak of ancestors as envious of the wealth and prosperity of the living (Danielli 1947:275) which to anyone I knew in Arivonimamo at any rate would certainly have been precisely the same as calling them witches.

15. Part of the older men's reluctance to talk about ancestral violence probably had to do with the fact that they were very close to being ancestors themselves, and simply as figures of authority tended to identify with their position.

16. Literally, "pronouncing imprecations." It is an abstract noun derived from *tsitsika,* which means "imprecations," and which is very close in meaning to *ozona*—in fact, the words could sometimes be used as synonyms.

17. Or, aggrieved.

18. Most often these imprecations were pronounced over a series of objects, also arranged in the winnowing basket, each of which was meant to represent one of these disasters: a rifle to represent death in battle, dung from a motherless cow to represent being excluded from one's family tomb after death, seven pieces of grass to represent seven members of one's family also being killed . . . (Cousins op cit.).

19. Except, of course, that no blood has been added to this liver. Liver incidentally was said to be appropriate to *fatidra* not only because of its absorbent qualities but because it was itself the bloodiest part of any animal.

20. Any independent ruler who "agreed" to accept the Merina sovereign's rule had to take these oaths of loyalty; so did the population at large, whenever a new one came to power. See Cousins (1968:93–94), who describes three kinds of oath: *velirano* ("beating water"), *lefona omby* ("spearing an ox"), and *misotro vokaka* ("drinking royal earth"). In the first two, those taking the oath attack some object, while calling on the invisible powers to attack them in a similar fashion should they violate the oath; in the third, they drink water mixed with earth taken from royal tombs. Contemporary ordeals which involve tomb-earth and gold presumably synthesize this form of (royal-derived) ritual with the common "gold-water ordeal" current in much of Madagascar (see Decary 1951:196–8).

21. *Tangena* and oaths had to be administered by members of the Andriamasinavalona order (local grandees and heads of *menakely*) who acted in the capacity of representatives of the sovereign.

22. In Betafo, people's spades would occasionally hit on bones while they were working in the fields, which would turn out to be parts of human skeletons. Such spots would invariably be referred to as *fasana mpamosavy*—"witch tombs"—and assumed to contain the remains of people killed by the *tangena*. Such bodies were always carefully removed and reburied so as not to irritate their ghosts.

23. This was probably accurate enough. As Françoise Raison-Jourde (1983a) has pointed out, royal rituals were always adaptations of popular ones, and popular forms continually borrowed back from the royal ones. The ritual forms certainly overlapped: for example, before giving *tangena* on a communal basis, the normal practice was to sacrifice a sheep called the *ondrikely kamboty,* the "little orphan sheep," mutilate the body, and then have everyone in the community call on the power of the *tangena* to treat them in the same way they had treated the sheep, should they be guilty (cf. Cousins 1968:96–97). This was exactly as in popular ordeals (Callet 1908:835–837).

24. The power behind *fatidra* was often referred to as *Manamango*, "that which destroys" or "consumes," or just *ny masina,* "the holy/powerful one." Around Arivonimamo, *tangena* was often used as a synonym for *fitsitsihina;* the main distinction between the two (aside from the presence of poison, and the fact that one was no longer practiced) was that the former was mainly thought of as a way of detecting and punishing witches, the latter, of detecting and punishing thieves.

25. Note the typical confusion between *tangena* and *tsitsika*: *tangena* wasn't really thought to kill a witch of its own accord, it was merely a way of identifying them.

26. Generally speaking, whenever standing stones (*orim-bato*) were erected, it was as the token of some kind of agreement. They were set up, for example, to mark the resolution of disputes by the *fokon'olona*—in fact, the standard formula used in such cases was "then both sides gave *hasina* to the queen and raised a standing stone" (*dia nanasin'andriana sy nanao orimbato izy roa tonta*), which indicated the two parties were once again in accord. The stone was meant to memorialize a decision, one which recreated the concord of the group.

The phrase was more often shorted to simply "then they both gave *hasina* to the queen," presumably since people always had to present the money (at least in those cases recorded in government record-books), as this was legally required, but they did not necessarily really set up stones. The phrase used for breaking an agreement, however, was always *mitsoaka orimbato* or *mitsoa-bato:* "dislodging the stone."

At the same time, most recorded cases were disputes about inheritance (my sources include notebooks FF66–69 in the National Archives—registers of *fokfon'olona* decisions from the late 1860s—and cases recorded in the AKTA series between 1878–1893 from Arivonimamo, Ambohitrambo, Ambohibeloma, Vatolevy, Ambohitrantenaina, Ambohibe, and Ambohidramijay). While there is no room to enter into details here, it is worth noting that almost all the occasions for raising rocks as memorials, in nineteenth-century Imerina, had to do with some kind of establishment of unity by means of making divisions. For instance, they can commemorate royal decisions on the division of land between descent groups (Callet 1908:65, 144, 148–151, 248, 387, 494, 578–84, 712), or simply mark borders between demes, as I was told.

27. Jacques Dez (1975), for example, claims "the *fokonolona*" was invented by King Andrianampoinimerina.

28. As Bloch (1971) emphasizes, the *fokonolona* principle first and foremost is a rejection of the idea of representation, that certain people can speak for others. Thus it is crucial that anyone can speak. As Dez emphasizes (1975:54–57), in principle women are as free to speak as men, and even children should be able to take part if they were capable of reasonable advice. The only formal exceptions I'm aware of are nineteenth-century political or judicial assemblies in which only adult males were expected to attend.

4. Character

1. No longer referred to as *Ranakandrian*, however, they are referred to simply as the ody's *lolo,* its "ghost" or its "spirit."

2. It is often translated "wise," and the abstract noun derived from it, *fahendrena,* is often used for "wisdom," but I never heard the adjective used that way in common speech.

3. *Mahasostra, mahakamo, manahirana, manelingelina, manadala, mahatongele; mahasostra-tay, mahasosotra-pory . . .*

4. Though most emphasize the inconvenience of lies more than their intrinsic evil. A typical example: "Lies are like sand: easy to throw out, but difficult to take back again."

5. Of course, an anthropologist might be inclined to doubt whether the emotions and dispositions gathered together under the rubric "envy" in English and other European languages necessarily have anything precisely corresponding to them in other languages and cultures. Actually, people can't even completely agree as to what "envy" is in English; but I think the basic constellation of attitudes variously bunched together as "envy" in English do have some parallel just about anywhere.

6. In the words of a Malagasy love song: "Whatever you love, may I love it; whatever you hate, may I hate it."

7. Ben-Ze'ev (1993) makes a good case that envy should be distinguished from moral sentiments entirely.

5. A Brief History of Betafo

1. Typically, the stories never make it clear if these are slaves, or subjects.

2. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, it was not part of either Ambohitrambo or Arivonimamo.

3. A few people did report a hazy tradition that the ancestor of Betafo's *andriana* was somehow related to Lailoza.

4. Obviously, the fact that the descendants of Andranovelona's slaves no longer live there makes it easier for them to represent their history this way.

5. The dates are derived from Alain Delivré's (1974:216–217) painstaking reconstruction from late nineteenth-century oral histories.

6. Confirmation can be found in a document from 1862, in which representatives of the Andriandranando of Ambatomivolana explain to Radama II that King Andrianampoinimerina had granted them their territory as a *lohombintany* in reward for their heroic efforts on his behalf. The text is in National Archives FF37:24R-26R (a case argued before the future Radama II, headed: Antananarivo 3 Alakarabo 1862), and has to do with a dispute over *fanompoana* between the Andriandranando and the owner of the *menakely* of Ambohitrantenaina directly to their north (Prince Razakaratrimo, father of the later Queen Ranavalona II).

7. Though it would not seem they were completely exempt. The Andriandranando, for example, appear to have been expected not only to safeguard the iron from *Vatolevy* but to assist in working it, as a document from the 1880s (National Archives GG89:155V-157R) makes clear. Since the present Andrianamboninolona also insist they were traditionally ironworkers, it's possible that they owed similar royal service.

8. Neither is there anything intrinsically unlikely about the idea that *hova* groups might have been shunted aside on royal orders, to make way for the Andrianamboninolona's occupation of Betafo. Someone must have been living there before. It might have even been done to compensate the colonists when the Andriamasoandro returned. This history, however, is almost impossible to reconstruct, as the descendants of the three towns in question have for the most part scattered or died out; all three are presently occupied by the descendants of slaves.

9. What Rakotovao means by saying that the *razambe* founded a church out west first, then moved to Betafo, is hard to say. It is an element that appears only in his version of the story. Rakotonarivo Auguste claimed the Protestant church in Betafo was founded in 1862, but it probably dates to the late 1860s.

10. I base this conclusion on the fact that a military log of circa 1841–42 (National Archives: IIICC393, folder #7, page 55V) lists Rakotoarivo of Betafo as the father of a soldier named Ramboa, and credits him with the substantial fortune of ten slaves and thirty head of cattle—far and above what anyone else from there is reported to have had. While the property figures found in these military logs always tend to be substantially higher than those in civil records, I think it's still likely he was the second-richest man of the deme at the time, after Andriamaharo in Betafo itself, who was also the *tompon-jato* (head of 100). I am basing my estimation of his age on the assumption that any man who had a son of military age in 1841 would be likely to have been born around 1800 at the latest.

11. Though this is much more an emphasis in *andriana* groups than *hova* ones; and as we shall see, even among the former it is often more a matter of principle than reality, as very few know how they are actually related to the earliest ancestors.

12. I met very few people who could remember further back than to their grandparent's generation, or at any rate to people they personally remembered from their childhood.

13. Stone was reserved for tombs; it was taboo to build a house of it.

14. Actually, an older tradition, preserved by Rakotonarivo Auguste, has it that the daughter was his only child, and the five boys were grandchildren, by a husband whose name has been forgotten.

15. One of Irina's brothers claimed to know the name of the fourth one, but no one even speculated on those of any of the others.

16. Older men from the southwestern quarter of the territory, the current village of Ambaribe, tended to present a very different picture even of the basic genealogical structure

of the deme. These are the people everyone else considers to be the descendants of youngest of the five brothers, who expressed their ongoing rivalry with the rest of Andrianambololona's descendants by all converting to Catholicism when the rest became Protestants in the late nineteenth century. They tend to claim the youngest three of the *razambe*'s grandchildren are buried in their own division, each in a separate tomb, though here too I never got exactly the same version from any two people.

17. Some counted *Andrefan'ny kianja* as a sixth, arguing it once contained a couple houses. Most, however, seemed to consider it part of Andrianony.

18. Just across the wall outside Antsahasoa are two more, founded by allied families, probably in the 1880s.

19. One manuscript by Rakotonarivo Auguste (whose history is described in chapter 6) does provide a possible genealogy, making Andriamaharo the descendant of an otherwise unknown granddaughter of Andriambololona, but this had apparently been forgotten by the time I got there.

20. Only two had been opened in recent memory; only two families living in the region remembered the names of any ancestors inside—and one of these, the *andriana* family who lived in Avarakady, had recently removed most of their own ancestors from it to place in a new tomb they had just built next to it.

Such information as I managed to get about them (mainly from manuscripts by Rakotonarivo Auguste) suggests they are probably a generation or more older than those to the west of the church. They are said, for instance, not to be divided into shelves like other tombs, but to confirm to an earlier model in which all the bodies were buried on a central "stone."

Members of one of these families live right next to them, in the same quarter of Betafo (called Avarakady), and have even fetched some bodies from one to place in a new tomb they recently had built there. So at least one of these ancient tombs has a known descendant. It is quite possible that there are tombs in other parts of Betafo's territory who once traced back to it, but whose origins are no longer remembered.

21. The most significant documents are: a data summary of the property censuses done between 1840–1842 (IIICC393 f2:10V), a similar document recording household membership and property in 1880 (E11:0066–69V, 74R), military and educational registers from the 1880s (NN10, NN39, GG62), and particularly, the AKTA notebooks—documents maintained in each rural district starting in 1878, recording property transfers, births, marriages and deaths, contracts and the resolution of local disputes.

AKTA records were also kept during the colonial period: for Betafo, I went over etat civil and registries of land inheritance from the 1910s and '20s. In addition, I was lucky enough to get access to a number of documents concerning Betafo now in private hands. Most of these are the result of the efforts of a single individual, a certain Rakotonarivo Auguste, who died in 1970. Among these are annotated parish registers for Betafo's Protestant church from 1929–1939, and a book of genealogies, running over 100 pages, originally based on the memories of people alive in the earliest decades of this century, and kept updated until the present day.

Finally, Miadana managed to locate what seems to have been an official register of inhabitants of Betafo dating from 1959, whose author I do not know—it was sitting in a locked chest in her neighbor Sely's attic.

For 1842, then, there is only a statistical breakdown which doesn't really include many names. This is too bad, because 1842 was little more than a generation after the *andriana* were first established there, and more detailed information might have helped answer some obvious questions about the origins of the hierarchical structure of the deme.

22. He is the great-grandfather of Andriamaharo, the man who was *tompon-jato* "head of 100" in 1841, and who was thus likely to have been born around 1800.

23. The Andriandranando across the mountain arrived in at least three groups, each representing one of the main divisions of their order (cf. National Archives FF37:24R-26R).

24. This figure is based on projecting the average household size derived from the second period (exactly 2.5) backward to this one. There's no way to know if this is really appropriate.

25. IIICC393 f2 10V-11R. Actually, this is an assumption based on the fact that the *tompon-jato* was usually (but not always) the richest man in the community. Anyway, there are no other likely suspects.

26. IIICC391 f43 5V [1875]; IIICC381 f1 #86–99 [1877]; IIICC382 f1 #113–114, 117–8 [1879]. Residents of the rival family of *tampon-tanana* hardly appear on these lists at all.

Betafo's church must have been one of the earliest in the region. Its precociousness might have had something to do with the Andriamaharo family's connections in central Imerina, where even before the queen's conversion, there were important patronage networks built up around Protestant officers and officials. Two of Andriamaharo's three wives, for instance, were high-ranking *andriana* from Ambohijoky, near the capital, the third being Andrianamboninolona from Fieferana.

27. After 1875, London Mission Society missionaries newly established in a station in Ambohibeloma assigned Betafo a pastor named Rainimampisambotra, according to a eulogy written on his death in 1893, a former slave and merchant of sterling character from Ambohidramijay to the north, who had paid back the money for his own redemption after it had been put up by one of the missionaries. We have little knowledge of how he was received by the Andriamaharo family, except that they sold him some rice-fields at vastly inflated prices.

28. The *teraky* Andriamaharo must have quickly became one of the largest families in Betafo. Andriamaharo himself had ten children, thirty-nine grandchildren, and over a hundred great-grandchildren. Of course, not all of these would have considered themselves members of the family: of his ten children, only three were boys, though two of his daughters (Ramatoa Raoizy and his youngest daughter, Razakavolonjafy) seem never to have married, so their children would have definitely been part of the *teraky* Andriamaharo.

29. Between 1883 and 1893, its head Andriamihagarivo sold off a total of nine and one-third slaves—almost equivalent to the total number they were credited with in 1880. Natural increase ensured that the actual total of hands they had at their disposal declined much less—in fact, in 1888, when Andriamihagarivo arranged his will, he still had ten. Still, the family seemed to be suffering from a continual lack of money.

30. Unless otherwise stated, statistical details are based on NN82, the prime minister's registry concerning the Sakaizambohitra.

31. The Merina army was ranked in a system of "honors," ranging from 1 (for a private) to 15 (for a major general). 6 Honors was formally equivalent to captain.

32. Interestingly, the census lists Andriamaharo's son Andriamihagarivo first, and Rasoavelo only second, suggesting that for official purposes the former was still considered Betafo's most prominent man.

33. Who actually held the exact same rank as he.

34. IIICC 398 f43:5V.

35. By at least 1881 (GG62:176R). So was the other male among the three.

36. In 1882 their name had been changed to Antily, but this involved no change in personnel.

37. A relatively impoverished descendant of Andriamaharo was elected as "Governera Madinika" (Minor Governor), with several others as *mpiadidy,* or assistants. Ralaitsivery's position was technically secretary to the *mpiadidy*. The *fokon'olona* agreement was recorded in the official government journal, *Gazety Malagasy* (1885, No59: 186).

38. I first heard this from Ratsizafy, but others later confirmed it. No one, though, remembered much in the way of details.

39. A woman who is not originally from Betafo but from the district of Vonizongo in the northwest of Imerina.

40. Though this didn't stop Rasoavelo's own son Andriantonga from marrying an Antsahasoa woman only a few years later.

41. Bandits were not, in fact, active in this region at the time.

42. Mainly limited to death or change of residence.

43. When a French researcher spoke to him about Betafo's history in 1968 or '69, he reported that Andriambololona and his wife had first arrived in Betafo on "October 2, 1713" (Augustins 1971:556).

44. People in Belanitra still refer to him as *dadabe*, a term reserved for the most important ancestors, and he is said to have lived to a hundred.

45. He is using the French word, *magique,* which is extremely unusual.

46. Rakotonarivo is generally left off as he was not entirely in his right mind.

47. The *andriana* who no longer live in Betafo usually don't have such illusions, rather, those who do usually imagine they are the people who are actually holding the lost manuscripts.

48. One definition of a slave—not just in Madagascar—is a person without kin, without any sort of social relations but those of dependence. Gillian Feeley-Harnik makes this particularly clear in some of her writings on Sakalava slavery (1982), but the logic exists in Imerina too.

49. If they did there was almost always an exceptional reason. For instance, in the case of one of the four tombs opened in Irina's *famadihana*, there was a notebook because keeping track of the ancestors buried inside it was considered a family responsibility, inherited with a large amount of land from a woman who formally adopted her father just for the reason of ensuring her ancestors would not be forgotten. There were none for any of the other tombs, despite their occupants being more closely related.

50. The odd thing, perhaps, is that people were so reluctant to talk about all this. The normal reaction to someone selling off the ancestral lands is indignation and suggestions that ancestral punishment will likely follow, especially when he sells it off to slaves. On the other hand, one might say that Rakotonarivo's punishment had already come; or even, that he himself was the agent of the punishment visited on the *andriana*.

6. Anti-Heroic Politics

1. This is not to say they may not anyway, just that they are not explicitly intended to.

2. This has inspired endless debate as well but again, I pass over it.

3. Though it does seem to have restored some of the former importance of the *fokon'olona* in mediating disputes.

4. Which is not to say that parallel forms and other ways of framing experience will always exist to contest this.

Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958) actually proposed a three-part distinction between "work, labor and action" which reflects this perfectly, though it did not occur to her to relate this with power. In the highest domain, "action" which she imagines as basically political, things done in order to be recounted, talked about, and remembered afterward. Note too that "power" here is not so much the power to act as the power to prevent others from acting—on this most elementary level, by defining what action is.

5. A fifth element is the (at least imagined) presence of an audience.

6. This goes way beyond the idea of identifying with people who claim to represent one—to be representatives of some group, class, or social tendency to which one belongs, though it might overlap with it. It is a matter of identifying people who might have next to nothing in common with the identifier.

7. The main reason I used the example of setting a fire, rather than say, hunting (which is a kind of activity notorious for generating stories) as a typically dramatic male activity is that setting a fire requires no particular physical strength, so it is impossible to make a case that there is any physical basis to the matter.

8. Obviously, it usually does, and the threat of violence absolutely requires it. The only point I am making is that violence *can* have effects even if not so mediated. Other ones cannot.

9. That stories should downplay the role of narrative in the framing of the reality they describe is not in itself altogether surprising. If all stories were about stories, where would it end? On the other hand, all this does not subtract from the fact that violence—and the threat of violence—do indeed underpin most, if not all, political orders and systems of inequality. It merely disguises the means by which they do so.

10. Educators naturally having fixed on the most innocuous of the stories, people had come to identify the stories with authority, and no one I talked to even seemed aware that many of the traditional ones were utterly subversive.

11. Interestingly enough about the only times they approximated this was in stories by young men, usually in a political context. Armand, for instance, would sometimes talk about occasions on which he took decisive action and was clearly in the right. But he did not like to tell stories at all.

12. The two most common terms used by women scolding men were *kamo lahy* and *sitraponao:* the first means "lazy male," two words sometimes treated as almost synonymous; the second literally means "that which gratifies your heart," but is used to imply foolish or impractical desires or projects of action which men insist on pursuing without regard to common sense.

13. Jokes almost always take this form, but so often do horror stories.

14. The stories of transgression and retribution I've already discussed, for instance, don't seem to quite fit into any of these—though perhaps they do not need to have a gripping form, because they contain such immediately practical information.

15. A nice review of terminology can be found in Vincent 1978.

16. Take, for example, the story of the church elders who came to blows during services. One could easily imagine that in a different cultural context—say, in rural Mexico instead of rural Imerina—each camp might, rather than taking the incident as an example of the immaturity of the elders, remember some insult, some act of aggression or disrespect, and consider it to entirely justify continued antipathy between the two sides, or even, as an unbalanced account demanding vengeance. It is just this sort of logic—the logic of the feud—which is entirely lacking in rural Imerina.

17. The same was true of violence. When *razambe* do commit acts of violence, it is usually against their descendants, long after they are dead. Here though violence seems to be playing the very opposite of its usually ideological role; rather than covering up the role of stories and representation in politics, it is the threat of ancestral violence which ensures ancestral stories will continue to be remembered and discussed.

18. Public at least in so far as it was in front of other people, though these might be just one family.

19. Say someone is attacking you with an *ody*, said Haingo, Miadana's eldest daughter. If you get an *ody* to protect you, it all comes down to which is the more powerful. If yours is the weaker, you're likely to get hurt. But say you had no idea that you were even being attacked, and didn't get any counter-magic; it would have had no effect on you whatsoever. Miadana qualified: "Unless it's something that they put in your food; then it doesn't matter if you know about it."

20. Just about everyone would agree with such statements in the abstract. On reflection, some would qualify. Certain spirits were famous for punishing those who accidentally brought pork or garlic to the places where they lived. Often people would be struck ill even if they had no idea there was a *Vazimba* there. But in such cases, it was never a really terrible illness. What really got the spirits angry was open defiance and challenge, some skeptic saying "What's all this nonsense about a *Vazimba*, anyway?" (*inona kosa no ity resaka Vazimba ity*) and intentionally carrying pork to a spot where one was presumed to reside—resulting frequently in death or major disaster. It was exactly the same with ancestral *fady*.

21. Though, in some cases, it is true, these *fady* are seen as protecting others, or as maintaining the power of charms that do so—so it is not strictly the listeners' interests such people have in mind.

22. Like love medicine, which had a notorious tendency to take possession of its owners.

23. On *Vazimba*, see chapter 8. Everyone had heard of the *bibin'Andrianony* (Beasts of Andrianony)—one of Ratsizafy's sons even referred to it as a "creature with seven heads," a classic figure of Malagasy mythology (Ottino 1977). The idea of an ancient *Vazimba* named Andrianony though is probably relatively recent story, limited to *andriana* from Belanitra; at least I never heard it from anyone else.

24. As had been ancient *sampy*; in fact, *ody havandra*, or hail charms, were often simply *sampy* that had been renamed.

25. The word "ghost" in this sense is opposed to "ancestor" (*razana*) because it is a being which lacks either physical remains, a body, or a particular name or identity.

26. I call them "moats" rather than "ditches" because they are seen as ancient and impressive fortifications; actually, there is only water on the bottom after heavy rains.

27. All space is divided into twelve "destinies," each corresponding to one of the twelve lunar months; the first, Alahamady, for instance, corresponds to the northeast, the ancestral direction. The northeast corner of the house is called "the corner of the ancestors" and this is where libations and other offerings are made. One can use the walls of a properly laid-out house as a mnemonic to make astrological calculations.

28. The medium's own spirit.

29. Jean Marie occasionally even called them *zavatra baikonana,* "things that are commanded."

30. This is not necessarily the case in other parts of Madagascar, where there are endless stories about "nature spirits" or "spirits of life," tree spirits, river spirits, forest spirits (Faublee 1954).

31. They are so much abstractions that people do not even consistently use the singular or plural when referring to them; they have no individuality, in and of themselves.

32. In this it used to be, and sometimes still is, contrasted with the *ambiroa,* the "double," which represented the visible aspect of the person, their external individuality. In the nineteenth century people usually spoke of the *ambiroa* as the aspect of the person that survives death; now—at least around Arivonimamo—it always the *fanahy.*

33. Incidentally, it is not that people did not tell stories meant to inspire sympathy, it was simply that one did not inspire sympathy by asking others to sympathize with a character's *intentions.*

34. I note that most of the "Malagasy" forms of knowledge I've mentioned are not even referred to as *fahaizana,* at least when speaking in the abstract. Astrological knowledge is a partial exception. School-learning was much more ambivalent; it was respected, but as we've seen in the case of Rakotonarivo Auguste, it did not necessarily augment one's status as an elder. It was much the same with government positions like *President Fokotany*—holding such an office certainly was not felt to detract from one's status as an elder; people talked as if it should really reinforce it. But in practice, it was mainly younger men, in their forties or perhaps fifties, who held such offices—not ones who would ever be considered *Ray amandReny*—though they were often men who clearly aspired to that status. This was essentially a matter of trajectory. Since it was extremely unlikely that even the most successful rural office-holder would move on to higher levels of government, such men would eventually retire by the time their children were all married. Some former notables or former *President Fokontany* went on to be very respected elders—particularly, after they were dead. Keeping the office for too long might well endanger one's social standing, since the universal assumption is that politicians are all corrupt, and that anyone who sought office was ultimately intending to use the position for their own material advantage.

35. He might also provide *ody,* and explain its *fady* and proper use, or recommend the patient gather earth and water the shrine of an ancient king—though the latter was more the province of *Zanadrano*, or spirit mediums.

36. Many astrologers did make use of the ancient kings as well—for instance Ratsizafy had his pantheon of four kings—but they used their own ancestor as a point of access. *Zanadrano* appealed to them directly.

37. For instance, Ratsizafy's claims to be able to prevent the rain in chapter 10.

38. He had retired two or three years before I arrived; the current catechist was a younger woman of *mainty* descent who lived in Antanety.

39. Curing *ambalavelona*, I might note, is considered the particular domain of *Zanadrano.*

In a later conversation he admitted that there was a *Vazimba* in a spring on his property, but claimed that though once dangerous, it was not particularly active any more. Why hadn't he mentioned it before? You never asked!

40. There are, remember, two *fokontany*: an eastern one centered on Betafo, and a western one centered on the village of Antsahavory, and including Ambaribe.

41. Madame Mariel, the schoolteacher, confirmed that the children of Ambaribe were all well aware of his trance activities because they spied on him.

42. Hence Ratsizafy's otherwise peculiar comment to me, once: that Rainitamaina, his ancestor, was "our *Vazimba.*" He meant it served a parallel role in being the spirit one invoked first, as a way of gaining access to the others.

Astrologers too were always imposing taboos on their followers, and while two examples is a rather small sample, it is interesting to note that Ramena and Rainibe probably

had a more skeptical attitude about taboos than just about anyone else I knew. Ramena, of course, claimed to reject the concept entirely, on religious grounds. But Rainibe, an unobservant Protestant who never indulged in this sort of religious rhetoric, was not all that different. He did recognize the taboos attached to Ratsizafy's hail charm as legitimate, but otherwise he tended to dismiss all of them as recent impositions, probably invented and by some astrologer or *mpomasy,* certainly, nothing you could not ignore.

43. I note that when I am speaking of witches and witchcraft here I am speaking of using medicine to attack others; whether "witches who go out at night" exist, or rather, whether there are really people who pretend to be such witches, is rather a different question. On the face of it, it seems unlikely. But so many otherwise skeptical friends of mine (Parson, for example) insisted that they had personally seen groups of naked women wandering abroad at night that it is tempting to suspect some do—if only adolescents, perhaps, going out for the prankish thrill of watching men run away on seeing them—if not also the halo of dangerous (and perhaps alluring?) power that would then inevitably surround them amongst anyone who recognized them later. Armand told me he knew for certain of three teenagers from Belanitra who had done this, though he refused to name names; Ratsizafy was apparently talking about the same three when he described how someone had tried to chase them and watched them leap fearlessly into a moat. "Those three won't be getting husbands," he snorted, "unless it's by *ody fitia*."

44. His place, I was told, was always more crowded than its competitors, even though the food there was not particularly good. Others observed that he had an extremely powerful voice, and made it a habit of shouting out every order he took so loudly that ensured almost everyone in the marketplace was forced to hear his daily menu repeated over and over again. This, they said, caused no end of annoyance to his neighbors, but it was a very effective form of advertisement.

45. Being able to do so might be considered the very sort of thing which makes one no longer an outsider.

46. Actually she said *mampiasy ody gasy,* which is only slightly less severe.

47. Actually she did foster a few of her nieces, so she didn't live entirely alone.

48. At least, all the ones I heard about were men.

49. Called the *rakitra mpamosavy,* obviously modeled on the collection made in church.

50. Including, as we've seen, Rakotonarivo Auguste.

51. Though the other side was much less subtle in their comments on Ramena's ancestors: his grandfather, said Ratsizafy, had been a notorious sorcerer in Malagasy times, "a real savage" (*mpamorika be tamin'ny tany gasy; olon-dia mihitsy*) who terrified everyone.

52. *Ody basy* (gun medicine) which protected one against bullets, for example, was considered to be mainly used by bandits.

53. Actually by the late 1980s, straitened economic circumstances had forced even most older people to keep up such trades to some degree or another. But these trades did not define them as social persons. If a man in his thirties or forties was a blacksmith (and perhaps one of every four male *andriana* was) it was a basic part of their identity: that's Rasolofo, they would say, the smith from Belanitra. Many men in their fifties or sixties, even seventies, worked as smiths too, but no one would ever tell me so spontaneously. If I found out, it was only accidentally—say I dropped by to visit when they were at work. Once they were dead, there was no way to find out, unless one specifically asked—or unless, perhaps, it slipped through as a passing detail in a story, as when Ramena began an anecdote by saying he had set off to do some forging with a man named Randrianjanaka—a man I had actually

heard mentioned innumerable times as a famous elder who had died a decade or so before, especially renowned for his oratory, but who I would never have otherwise known had been a smith. Unlike oratorical skill, it was not relevant to his status as an elder or an ancestor.

The same is true of local political office, which as I say is typically held by men in their forties or fifties. If someone had been *President Fokontany*, they would often be referred to as the "former president" (*President taloha*)—it was still an integral part of their social identity, but usually became irrelevant for very old men or ancestors.

54. In folk tales, young men often win their fortunes with the help of powerful *ody*; as Bloch explains, money and mobile wealth is generally identified with individual gratifications, and opposed to land and tombs which are ancestral kinds of property (Bloch 1985; 1986).

55. One was located in Antanety, and protected the fields of Irina's family. Irina said it was created by her father to oppose Ratsizafy's influence, and that it protected the fields of many *andriana* who lived further to the west. In Ambohimanjaka, in the northwest of the territory, was another kept by an old man named Bernard—he told me it had been passed from respected elder to respected elder since at least the early part of the century. Ramena, whose herbs protected the fields in the southwest of Betafo, claimed to have inherited it from his grandmother. In each case, those under the protection of the charm had to keep its taboos, even Ramena's, since there were some. Even he admitted to one, a *fady miady;* disputes and other public quarrels were not allowed during the growing season.

56. In talking about blacksmithing, I noted that certain types of knowledge and ability which are central to defining a person's social identity at one stage of their life might become basically irrelevant afterward. Knowledge of medicine is often like this; even when people spoke of older men who owned hail charms, it was rarely the thing that was considered most interesting or important about them. A few important ancestors, though—even *razambe*—were remembered mainly as adepts in medicine. However, in my own experience, this is usually another way of legitimizing magical powers: in almost all cases, descendants still made use of these ancestors' abilities. Rakoamboa is one example: during his *famadihana*, several of the assembled descendants told me that he was buried wrapped together with much of their witch-catching medicine, and that during *famadihana*, their descendants were allowed to retrieve them. (Others, however, insisted this was so much drunken nonsense.) Another are the twin *razambe* of one of Irina's family's tombs, both *mpomasy,* kept wrapped together next to a bottle of their medicine. Their bodies, Irina told me, were not even allowed outside the tomb during *famadihana*. Others confirmed this was often the case with ancestors who were truly powerful magicians—presumably it is a reflection of that same logic of hiding objects to make them powerful; in this case, making the ancestors themselves into something like a hidden *ody*. In this case it was not entirely clear to me what this power was used for; family members hinted they had something to do with the hail charm, but that it was best not to speak of such things to outsiders. It was much more clear with Rainitamaina, Ratsizafy's ancestor—the astrologer who first brought his hail charm to Betafo. He continues to assist his descendants in control of the weather and in curing, and he, too, is not allowed to ever be taken from his tomb.

57. It is particularly hard to determine cause and effect in cases like this. Are women less likely to be seen as embodying legitimate authority because they are more likely to be considered witches, or are they more likely to be considered witches because they are not considered to embody legitimate authority? I suspect the latter, but how can one really say?

58. In part too, perhaps, this is because foreign bankers and even Malagasy politicians

were not really considered moral persons, of the sort one could hold accountable for the effects of their action; individual transgressors, however, were.

Even in individual cases, one could hear entirely different explanations of people's problems. During a different conversation, about economics, Rakotojaona launched into a long explanation of the financial problems of smiths: they refused to form a cooperative, were systematically ripped off by their suppliers, had no time to work their fields, and thus had to buy rice at inflated prices, and almost always ended up in penury. Solofo was his prime example.

59. Political science tends to work with two definitions of politics: one which emphasizes the resolution of social conflict, the other, the ways in which communities go about reaching collective decisions. Therefore, where such arenas do exist, they will always seem the most self-evidently political institutions because they clearly involve both.

60. Granted, most listeners probably will sympathize with the boy and want to know if he actually got better. But if this were organized as a story of suspense, where the boy's cure was the real point, there would have to be an active agent whose project is being described. This clearly isn't the boy, who is entirely passive. The real actors were the boy's parents, or whoever took him to the various curers in search of a cure; it is significant that the narrator never identifies these protagonists (though the narrator himself was surely one of them), thus doing everything he could to avoid the story being interpreted this way.

61. The word *tantara* means both "history" and "story." It can be used for any narrative presented as true. But if applied to recent events, the usual implication is that the speaker is not an eyewitness but is merely reporting something she has heard. Even when speaking of events that happened long ago, in Malagasy times, narrators would very often remark that they could not ultimately vouch for the truth of the story as they had not seen these things themselves.

62. We'll see some more of these in the next chapter; for example, the story of Rainitaba.

63. I was trying in my exposition on Ramena, to give some sense of the pleasure such scandalous revelations can afford, especially when they are about what seem to be very respectable people.

7. The Trials of Miadana

1. Obviously, they had come with an infinitely more sophisticated understanding of the cultural terms, they had more time and much greater practical incentives.

2. Rakoto Ramaro, the former caretaker, moved back to Arivonimamo and died two or three years later.

3. Jean Marie was incidentally a member of his family and political protégé.

4. As well as becoming the custodian of many of their tombs. He was (as we shall see) the only person in Betafo to actively seek me out on hearing that I was doing research on local history—it would have injured his reputation, he apparently felt, if a researcher came through and didn't speak to him.

5. Anosy, Ambatotapaka, and Belanitra.

6. Elizabeth said she didn't know if this meant that he would occasionally fix herbal remedies for him, or something more serious. Anyway it's unlikely to be true, since Ratsizafy was only in his twenties when her father died.

7. Ratsizafy had had a longstanding quarrel with the caretaker.

8. He did seem to have a regular propensity to make *andriana* work harder for their cures than *mainty* ones; I also noticed that, when *andriana* came to him to find the date for

a *famadihana*, he would almost always discover that the only astrologically appropriate time to open the first tomb was at two or three o'clock in the morning—often, on a night without a moon.

9. I use the term "family" for the Malagasy *fianakaviana,* which can be used either for a domestic family or a minor lineage.

10. Most of the black people in Betafo always thought of themselves as the leftists, and tended to vote with the ruling party, AREMA; the *andriana* voted for the AKFM for most of its history, the Soviet-line party, seen as the traditional party of the Protestant Merina bourgeoisie. The MFM claimed to carry the banner of grass-roots popular organizations established in the 1972 revolution, and was organized very much from the bottom up—so much so that when, around the time I was there, the head of the party publicly rejected socialism and became a neoliberal, party members like Armand or Parson denied it made much difference: the leadership's position was not really that important.

11. The Malagasy word is *fanavakavaham-bolo-koditra,* "making vain distinctions on the basis of hair and skin," though often people would just use the French, *racisme*.

12. Actually, when Miadana first arrived, Augustin's father Rabera was still alive; though he was already somewhat overshadowed by his son, the long-time President *Fokontany*.

13. The really wealthy ones rarely attended *famadihana*. When they did, it was discretely; the emphasis in *famadihana* was on the equality of all descendants, and even urban people would intentionally dress down for the occasion.

14. Miadana did not know which one of their ancestors was supposed to be responsible—she suspected it was probably Andriantonga. Armand had heard it might have been a woman. No one was quite sure, and since it would have been obviously rude to bring the matter up to members of Norbert's family themselves, I never asked them.

15. *Miavona*, "haughty," "arrogant," "conceited," was also the expression inevitably used by men for women not interested in sleeping with them.

16. Bear in mind here that his father was a very mild-mannered and unassertive elder. I also note that, since this family was always the most reluctant to talk to me, in part because of my friendship with Miadana, I find it difficult to reconstruct Norbert's version of events fully; this is one thing that makes the account seem very one-sided. On the other hand, since almost all of my *mainty* friends reacted to the subject with such embarrassment, I rather had the impression that an alternate version of the story, which justified Norbert's behavior, simply didn't exist.

17. He soon became the eldest son because Rapiera, his older brother, was killed in Ambatomitsangana in 1988. There is also a younger brother, Jean Kely.

18. This was certainly the likely end: Narcisse, their younger son, was a particularly brilliant student and would certainly end up in college if given any sort of chance.

19. Rakotovao from Ambohimanjaka.

8. Lost People

1. During the first generation after liberation, many former slaves lived much as they had before, cleaning the houses of their former masters, preparing their food, working their fields without compensation. Many sharecroppers were expected to keep up similar ties of dependence, at the very least supplying children to work as unpaid servants in their patrons' houses in town.

2. Black people, for example, were among the first to volunteer for the French army—many served in the trenches in World War I, often in the signal corps.

3. While most *olona fotsy* considered marriage with a descendant of slaves even more scandalous than selling land to one, it was certainly known to happen.

4. In so far as people recognized differences, they were more in orientation: black people were considered to be more skilled at medicine, more likely to take an interest in astrology or spirit mediumship. All this is not surprising. Since slaves had been brought to Imerina from every corner of Madagascar, they shared nothing with each other which they did not already share with their newfound overlords as well.

5. I use the term "lineage" here because most *mainty* descent groups trace back to founders who were in the prime around the turn of the century, or even later; as a result, almost everyone still remembers the genealogical links that connect them to their *razambe*. This is, of course, in striking contrast to the *fotsy* demes discussed in chapter 3. Otherwise, the only other difference in principles of kinship between black and white is that the former frown on the sort of cousin marriages so popular amongst *hova* and *andriana*: marriage even with second cousins, I was told, was strictly prohibited. As a previous researcher has remarked (Razafindratovo 1986), out-marriage is a sensible strategy for people with little or no resources, since it ensure webs of kinship spread out in all directions. Most black people maintain links with aunts, uncles, and cousins in more than a dozen different places, often, widely scattered across Imerina or beyond. One result is that when an opportunity arises—if someone comes into a sizable bit of land, for instance—relatives quickly start showing up from all directions; it also means that, where there is no land, it is wellnigh impossible to prevent one's children from vanishing.

6. In each case, documents have been preserved in the colonial AKTA books.

7. Since 1960, it has also been the home of Betafo's Catholic church.

8. This is actually not a name but the title used for him now, but it will do as a pseudonym.

9. Rajaonera is in fact Ramanana's grandfather, and when her children quarrel with Ingahirainy's—which they often do—both parents admonish them by reminding them of their ancestor's oath of mutual love and their obligations to continue it—though usually, with only temporary good effect.

10. This anyway would explain why several present-day descendants insist that she was a "Merina person from right around here" (*olona Merina avy aty mihitsy*) despite the fact that all of her many husbands recorded in archival records were clearly slaves. Since Rainilaimiza and Rakoto the Rat were the only ones of her many children whose father is unknown, and since they seem to have unusual advantages, one might speculate that they were in fact illegitimate sons of their master, but there is of course no way to know.

11. Rainilaimiza is in fact listed as a witness to the contract (AKTA Ambohitrambo, Vola sy Tany, 1893).

12. The document lists Rakondrainibe as his "father," but the names of slaves' masters were often given in the "father" column in the Catholic baptismal records; doubtless the same was being done here.

13. *Governera Madinika* were appointed by French administrators while the *mpiadidy* were elected by the *fokon'olona.* Administrators, however, had the right to veto and otherwise control the outcome of elections (Rainibe 1986).

14. French colonial documents confirm that Andriantonga was *Governera Madinika*—first of Betafo and later of Andranovelona, when the office was moved to the latter site—and the existence of a *mpiadidy* named Rakotovoalavo.

15. The narrator wants to say *vadin'ny anabaviny,* "husband of his sister"—a grievous insult—but cannot bring himself to pronounce the actual words.

16. Just as anyone who begins a formal speech, no matter how venerable, must always apologize for the temerity of speaking, so telling history is an act of a certain presumption which has to be justified, as there are always more venerable *Ray amandReny*, parties with more seniority who should really be speaking—even if as it usually turns out they are already dead. I found elders would quickly point out that they were not eyewitnesses to the events in question, even if these were events that took place in pre-colonial times they could not possibly have witnessed.

17. Actually, here the narrator is exaggerating: everyone else believed that Ralaitsivery's body is indeed in the central tomb of the *telo milahatra,* along with those of everyone else in his illustrious family.

18. According to Augustin, his body was returned to Betafo when he died in the 1950s: outsiders, he said, cannot be buried in a Sakalava tomb. His children remained with their mother in Boina, and, since they are buried with her, no one in Betafo any longer remembers anything about them.

19. Her father, I was told, was a policeman from the capital.

20. Their children and grandchildren still live there, only rarely passing through the Betafo.

21. French documents from the second decade of the twentieth century say that he was Rabakomanga's father, and that she was born in Antandrok'omby in the 1860s.

22. *Kalanoro* are diminutive, human-looking creatures said to live in watery places; one often hears that they are living versions of *Vazimba*.

23. Armand's brother Germain had gone much further: he had told me she hadn't ever had a child and then happened to pass by the stand of reeds where Rainitaba was, saw the animal, and immediately afterward found she had conceived a male child.

24. A kind of silk cloth from Betsileo, marked by bands of bright color set between black and white stripes, worn during Betsileo funerals, but also on festive occasions.

25. When she died in 1913 this land estimated to be worth about 152 francs; actually somewhat above the average legacy for Betafo as a whole. (Though this might simply be because none of the land had been parceled out in advance among her sons.) Her husband, who had died in 1912, appears to have left no property at all to his descendants, which is apparently the reason he has been entirely forgotten.

26. The last most people remembered was a very tall woman named Rabakolava; she had a number of children who either married away or, reportedly, now lived in town—though I never managed to track any of them down. In her old age she lived by herself and like most solitary old women was rumored to be a witch. Her brother Pascal only died in 1985 or so, an impoverished laborer who suffered from epileptic fits. I shall have more to say about Pascal later in the chapter, but for now, the important thing is that his children too have also since disappeared.

27. One medium from Arivonimamo told me they were usually ancestors whose descendants no longer "took care of them." If descendants stopped conducting *famadihana*, stopped keeping up the tomb, eventually the ancestor's *fanahy* or soul would leave the crumbling tomb entirely to settle in watery places, having become fierce creatures full of resentment toward the living. Others suggested most *Vazimba* were the spirits of travelers from other parts of Madagascar—Bara, Sakalava, Betsileo—who happened to die while passing through, and were buried hastily on the spot by whoever found them there. Others would point to the existence of *Kalanoro*, small human-like creatures rumored to live in distant lakes and marshes. *Vazimba*, they suggested, were the ghosts of Kalanoro. Finally, some (Rakotovao, for instance, or Mariel) did speak of *Vazimba* as if they were a former

population, long since driven away, and therefore, whose ancestors no longer had any descendants to remember them.

28. The connection probably would have made perfect sense to missionaries and other European intellectuals who assumed that *Vazimba* were themselves the remnants of an African population; slaves, after all, were mainly drawn from the coastal populations of Madagascar, who were assumed to be equally African. I never met anyone, even educated people, who used anything like this kind of logic in the present-day. The affinity existed on an altogether different level.

29. This indeed is the gist of most previous analyses. Gerald Berg (1977), for instance, notes that in Merina king lists, the earliest rulers are referred to as *Vazimba* because unlike later kings they were not buried on solid ground, their bodies were thrown into lakes. Likewise Bloch (1982, 1985, 1986) draws an opposition between ancestors identified with ancestral land and *Vazimba* identified with water.

30. See, for example, Domenichini 1985:416–445; Rajaofera 1912; Aujas 1912:16–17; Peetz 1951a; Firaketana: Andriambodilova; Bloch 1991; cf. Haring 1982:358–359. She is considered one of the most ancient ancestors of a large and historically significant deme called the Antehiroka, whose territory is just to the north of the capital. The Antehiroka are sometimes described as *Vazimba* themselves—if only because they were the original inhabitants of the hill on which the capital was later built, displaced when it was taken over by royalty.

31. An interesting parallel with Rainitaba, of course, who also is said in some vague sense to be responsible for the fertility of his descendants.

32. Actually, according to genuine Betsileo belief it was only certain types of royalty that did so: cf. Shaw 1878:411; Abinal 1885:242–246; Sibree 1883:170, 1898:198; Dubois 1938:716–18; Delord 1958; Razafintsalama 1983.

33. In *famadihana* the evocation of emotionally-charged memories becomes even more explicit. When one places the bodies of women's relatives on their laps, the effect is to break the power of women's most vivid, intimate memories of people that they loved. It evokes that entire world in order to efface it, to free the living from their attachments to the dead.

34. In Rainitaba's case as well, it is clear that ancestral memories were hardly being considered an imposition on descendants. Unlike the *andriana* ancestors discussed in chapter 3, the "blessing" he offered to his descendants was clearly something more than simply leaving them alone, it was a concrete benefit. But it was also one they were unable to receive. (I note, however, that it was not referred to as a *tsodrano*, rather, as a *fahasoavina*.)

35. In fact one of the first things he wanted me to know is that he had always had good dealings with Vazaha. Rainibe though was deferent to all forms of authority, including that of the old *andriana*, in a way which I found curious and unusual: I always had the feeling of a certain wry element or trace of subversiveness in the way he praised his former masters, the hint of a hidden content—at the very least, the unstated fact that they were no longer his masters now. This was typical of his whole manner of self-presentation with me, and from all I can gather with everyone, which is deeply wrought with subtexts.

36. When the family first appears in documents.

37. Colonial documents say she was born in 1867, in Betafo, to a couple named Rafiringa and Ratsierena, otherwise unknown. I am not sure there even was a settlement on the top of the mountain in the late nineteenth century. There was in 1817, when the first missionaries passed through the area, but it is difficult to believe it was still in use for the rest of the century, since there are no visible remains today, and it would be an

extremely inconvenient place for anyone to live. Most mountaintop forts were abandoned after the pacification of the nineteenth century.

38. On Lailoza, see chapter 4. Actually, the tomb—known in the nineteenth century as Fondanitra ("at the heart of the sky")—was the traditional sepulcher for the kings of East Imamo, though all this had been forgotten by the time I was there.

39. Or anyway, as a man with a *Vazimba*; though most agreed that if one had a *Vazimba* this is what one usually used them for.

40. Finally Nety was so worried about her dreams she told her she didn't have to do the family laundry any more. Razafy though insisted that this particular *Vazimba* was no longer very dangerous—"If you really examine the matter," she said, "it's been pretty much defeated." It only struck people down occasionally if pork or pigs are taken by it, but not as a matter of course—it was only really fierce if people are explicitly skeptical and try to challenge it.

41. The innumerable tiny children swarming around him are also much like the ones in Rainibe's description of Rainizafibetelo himself, who first saw this *Vazimba*. In his case, one wonders if the vision was driven in part by the anxiety of knowing those children are very likely to disperse and drift away.

42. There were, in fact, a number of Sakalava from the west who joined in to help the resistance against the French during the rising in this part of Imerina.

43. I should explain that this Rasoamanarivo Victoire was a nineteenth-century nun who had been canonized during a papal visit to Madagascar in 1988. In 1990, her image was everywhere, mainly because it graced the top of a wall calendar which had been printed by some Catholic publisher and was being sold everywhere for next to nothing, and which for that reason seemed to be hanging in the living room of nearly every Catholic family in Madagascar, as well as those of quite a number of *hotely* and shops. The picture is of an extremely severe-looking woman, fortyish, with a stocky frame and closely cropped hair. (Actually, I long thought it was the picture of a man.) Her sister, Renée hastened to point out, was very different.

44. Presumably some of it at least locked in her embrace, but he modestly left off at this point in the story.

45. Named after a kind of reedy plant notorious for growing around *Vazimba* places.

46. Now, this was clearly something that really did happen. There were, indeed, people who used to throw themselves into water periodically. In Belanitra too there was a story about a man who used to do this in colonial times—a certain Rakotovazaha, nicknamed "the Vazimba" because whenever gendarmes used to come through searching for those who had not paid their taxes, he would immediately run down to the fields and submerge himself in the nearest pool, then make strange bubbling noises if they passed by, to scare them off. Pascal, though, seems to have been a little more spontaneous.

47. In this chapter I have not spoken at any length about the actual practice of possession—mainly because, while I sat in on dozens of curing sessions by different *Zanadrano* in Arivonimamo, rural mediums are far more secretive, and I don't have firsthand knowledge of what people like Rainibe do. Still, I have every reason to believe it is basically similar to the practice of urban mediums.

9. The Descendants of Rainitamaina

1. I suppose one might add the name of the *andriana razambe*, since everyone knew that he had come there from Fieferana, but it's hard to think of this fact as a "story" really. And of course, very few even knew his name—most thought it was Andrianamboninolona.

2. Ranaivo the Bolt was trying to do much the same thing when he told the story of Ralaitsivery's murder, but that story was meant primarily to move *andriana*; this one, to appeal to the descendants of slaves.

3. French documents from the 1910s claim that Rainibaka's children Rainikotomamonjy and Raivo were both born in the 1860s. This would imply Rainibaka himself was born at least in the 1840s, when Andriamaharo was chief of 100.

4. Remember that the Andriamaharo family was at the time in the process of liquidating a large portion of their stock of slaves. Rainibaka was the first, sold by "Ramatoa Raoizy" to someone named Rakotomena, on 20 Alahamady 1883 (a date in the old Malagasy lunar calendar). Rangoritsiserahana followed in 1886, owned jointly by "Andriamihagarivo's family and Ramatoa Raoizy," then in 1887 Andriamihagarivo alone sold Rainisalama, and two years later, Ratsimisilaka. It might well be that all were actually owned collectively by the family, of which Andriamihagarivo was then the formal head. The three sons must have at least been in their forties by this time; being older men, they were let go for rather modest prices. "Ingoritsiserahana" on the other hand fetched a much higher price—which implies she was still of childbearing years.

5. According to family tradition, Rainitamaina had owned these; when he died, his sons realized there was not enough of it to support three different families, so the three agreed that whichever one of them was the first to father a male child would receive the entire legacy. As it happened, this was Rainibaka. The children of the other two were disinherited.

It is possible that this story is a latter day creation, and that this land was really land given to Rainibaka much later by Andriamaharo's family in 1895, in much the same way as the land was doled out in Antsahamasina. Or the story may be true.

6. He ended up doing very well, becoming a prosperous cattle merchant, amassing gigantic herds out west in Bevata and selling them in markets near the capital. Before long he became so high and mighty that he wanted nothing to do with his poor relatives in Betafo any more. He built a tomb for his descendants in Bevata, and none of them had ever visited Betafo.

7. Son of Ramatoa Raoizy, who had been at least part owner of Ratsizafy's grandfather Rainibaka.

8. One of the descendants of Rainizanabohitra from Antanety.

9. Named Raveloarisoa (1904–1930). According to Armand, Ranaivo also served in World War I but never received a pension because he forgot to fill out the necessary forms.

10. Except for his oldest son, Pierre, who had died a few years before.

11. Rainilaimiza's daughter: see chapter 8, part 2.

12. Again, rumor had it this was because of the wrath of the ancestors, though in this case, since both ancestors were rivals, opinions differ as to which ancestor is responsible, hers or his.

13. Whose mother, Razafindravao, was still alive but who was not herself a descendant of Rainitamaina.

14. The literal meaning of *tsy idiram-binanto* is "affines not admitted," which is this tomb's peculiar restriction: no one can bring in their wife or husband; only direct descendants of the *razambe* can be buried there. Just about everyone told the same story about how this came about. When the founders were gathering everyone together at the nearby quarries to the east of Arivonimamo, to begin the laborious process of breaking off slabs of granite by placing burning chips of cow dung at the fault lines of the rock, and then dragging the slabs with cables and rollers across the intervening hills, the

vinanto-lahy—that is, men married to the tomb's female descendants—were all caught up in some foolish argument about who would get the most honored cut of the ox that had just been slaughtered for the workers, and never showed up to work. The founders then cursed them never to be buried in the tomb. In fact, Armand remarked, couples tend to be separated even before death; it usually happens that one or two years before a descendant of that tomb is to die, their husband or wife will just mysteriously leave them and return to their ancestral lands.

15. In the nineteenth century, in fact, only the king and the four highest *andriana* orders were allowed to do so. The Andrianamboninolona it will be remembered are the fifth: they were the highest grade, then, that did *not* have this privilege.

16. As noted in chapter 9: among black people in rural Imerina, this is a fairly common claim. But no one else I know of took it as justification for anything like this.

17. I often noticed while gathering oral traditions that it was only men with some sort of claim to higher office—say, a former *President Fokontany*, a president of the church, a local astrologer even, who would feel entitled to tell the histories of kings.

18. Ratsizafy's was the northernmost, then an empty one that had belonged to his sister Razanapanahy was the second—though while I was there, his eldest son Pano married and moved in—and the last belonged to Rakoto.

19. Or even later, if one considers he only became a father when he was 62.

20. Literally a *trano vato,* or "stone house."

21. Ratsizafy on one occasion emphasized that Andriamaharo was a "son or grandson" of Andrianamboninolona, but this was a pretty thin thread.

22. This was the original spelling, and the name of the famous *andriana* group from which they derive. Nowadays even the people of Amberobe itself refer to themselves as "Andriananandro."

23. Armand told me that his father's version had it that Rainitamaina's cursed his descendants never to allow his tomb to be to the south of that of *any* descendant of Andriamaharo; if any of them built a new tomb to the north of his, they would have to build him a new one to the north of it again—this applied to all the area up to banks of the river Ikopa, some twelve kilometers to the north.

24. The word *leo* was once mainly used to mean "overcome," but now it usually means "sick of," "had enough of," "bored."

25. I have already mentioned that Ratsizafy and his sons were also known to refer to Rainitamaina himself as "our *Vazimba*"—by which they meant that instead of having some nameless, amoral spirit as their point of access to the invisible world of *doany* and ancient king, their own ancestor plays this role for them.

26. The reason the two had remained behind in Anosy, he added, was that one was wrapped together with his wife and thus was not allowed inside the *tsy idiram-binanto.* When Ratsizafy completed his own tomb, though, he was able to move their bodies in.

27. Similarly, stories of ancient oppression are almost always followed by the observation that the oppressors have since been punished by God or some other abstract force of justice, as if to imply there is no need for any ongoing bitterness.

28. Hence the use of ambiguous terms like *Ray amandReny*. His cousin Jean Marie was the only person I met who made this argument explicitly, saying that the other families—such as those discussed in this chapter—who could not trace back to him were in fact descended from his (otherwise unknown) daughters or secondary wives. Others, like Norbert, explicitly denied this. Norbert in fact made a point of adding that all of Betafo's *mainty* were really descended from slaves, whatever Ratsizafy's family might claim.

29. Obviously, if Andriamaharo's descendants had all died out there would be no need to forbid them from attending Rainitamaina's *famadihana*, but Augustin's account was full of such inconsistencies.

30. In the case of Rainitamaina, he had an ever more compelling reason, because Ranaivo represented the voice of an alternate tradition: unlike Ratsizafy and Augustin, who were both of the dominant line descended from Rainibaka, Armand was a descendant of Rainisalama, who though the oldest never received the *ody* or the land.

31. It might also quite possibly be true. There is some mention in archival sources from Vakinankaratra of people who were punished in this way (Pier Larson, personal communication).

32. Once when all three of us were attending a curing ritual at Mount Ambohitrambo, Rakoto challenged Chantal to test him if she didn't believe he was capable of working a *fanainga lavitra*—the form of love medicine by which the victim is "summoned from afar." Give me your sweater, then, he said, or a lock of hair, or anything; give it to me now and I bet you that one week from today, you will be back here on this mountain with me. No? Chantal declined.

33. The territory of the old kingdoms of East Imamo.

34. There are *ody* called Ravatomaina (Dry Rock) in Betafo, Ambohipo, Ambohidratrimo near Ambodifarihy, and oral traditions recount that *ody* of this name were once kept in Andranovelona, Manjakazaza, and Ambohimasina near Ambohitrantenaina as well; there are *ody* called Ravololona (Leafy One) in Amberobe, Ambatomitsangana, and was formerly said to have been one both atop Mount Marofihitra and in the village of Betafo. Both names occur in Renel's list of types of hail charm (1915:132–4) but unfortunately, he provides no further information. (Ravololona, on the other hand, is a very famous ancient charm, and was once the guardian *sampy* of a deme called the Zanak' Antitra.)

35. This was the one whose keeper later became too Christian and abandoned it, causing the charm to "turn" and become a thing of terrible, destructive power.

36. According to an anonymous source in the *Tantara ny Andriana* (Callet 1908: 219–220), probably written sometime around 1875, most hail charms were simply subsidiary versions of more powerful mother *sampy*.

One of the most renowned *sampy* in Merina history was indeed called Ravololona: it was the guardian *sampy* of a large and famous deme called the Zanak'Antitra, which had branches spread across the area surrounding Arivonimamo. Leaders of the Zanak'Antitra had carried Ravololona before them when they rose up against their French conquerors in 1895. Ambatomitsangana, one of the villages in the area north of Arivonimamo that still has a hail charm called Ravololona, was in fact a Zanak'Antitra settlement; people from that village did indeed stress to me that their Ravololona is not limited to protecting against hail but protects against every kind of danger. They also claim that the Ravololona in Ambatomitsangana is ultimately derived from theirs, though people from Ambatomitsangana told me it was really the other way around. I actually saw the Ravololona kept in Ambatomitsangana—or, actually, since that ancient village is now abandoned, near the present village of Amberobe. It is kept in an iron pot hidden in the wall of its own small house.

37. *Karazana resaka official izao izany.*

38. Literally, "one appearance with."

39. Everyone agrees that there is no longer a hail charm there, but Armand assured that there had been until quite recent times. The last keeper, he said, was an *andriana*

named Rabelohataona, one of the most important men in Andrianony during the '40s and '50s. When he died, however, there was no successor, and the object itself apparently disappeared. As usual, with such stories, many others I spoke to claimed never to have heard of this.

40. Or even for that matter the two astrologers at Mount Antongana, each on his own side of the mountain.

41. When Betafo's Sakaizambohitra wrote down the names of all men with more than one wife in 1878, at least one slave, Ravalisoa, was listed among them. He later married Rangorimainty, another slave, who in turn is known to have owned land in Avarakady. I am not aware of slaves who owned other slaves in Betafo itself, but Merina law did allow it (Domenichini and Domenichini-Ramiaranmanana 1982).

42. In fact, Rainifara once suggested to me it was Rainitamaina's very success—particularly his multiple marriages—that really inspired his conflict with the *andriana*. "So the little slave boy wants to learn how to be a polygamist" (*andevolahy kely ity no mba mianatra mampirafy*), they said.

43. They were just the sort of ambitious men who, if alive today, would be most likely to be keeping an *ody havandra*.

44. Country houses were almost always red. Most were made of blocks of earth, some more expensive ones, of brick—but the bricks were of exactly the same red color. In towns many people whitewashed walls and houses, even painted houses yellow, green, or blue, but country houses were very rarely painted, so with their surrounding walls and out-buildings they seemed almost continuous with the hard red soil that surrounded them.

45. The only other white house in the eastern *fokontany* was the one-story *fokontany* office in Belanitra, but it was a low building surrounded by other red ones so it did not really catch the eye.

46. I might remark here that since all proper houses should have their doors facing west, the senior segments of a deme are at least theoretically looking out over their juniors—since the highest ranking segments are always furthest to the east.

The whiteness of Ratsizafy's house recalls that of his tomb, on its high shelf of earth below the mountain, which is also visible wherever you are in the *fokontany*, unless its in the actual valley bottoms or some densely overgrown parts of Betafo.

47. Again, I never saw the ceremony carried out—which would very much be a matter of being at the right place at the right time, and in fact few people from Betafo claim to have seen it. My account is largely based on descriptions by Ratsizafy and his sons.

48. The *alam-bolon-jaza.* In Betafo this latter was very much optional, though there were only one or two families that did not *misanta-bary.*

49. Actually *ririnina* is an archaic word and its meaning is unclear; it might also mean "cleared away."

50. Particularly cold, dry days when the wind is blowing are often referred to as "*famadihana* days."

51. In the region of Arivonimamo, 91 percent of all precipitation falls during the six months between November and April. Hail, which hits mainly in April before the harvest, has been known to destroy up to 55 percent of the region's crops during particularly bad years (Bourdiec 1974:374–376).

52. They ripen in March and April, so this could mean waiting more than a month before being able to eat them.

53. I have already remarked in chapter 7 on how astrologers tend to blur the usual

distinction between the power of ancestors and that of medicine. Ratsizafy takes this much further than most.

54. Pano, Ratsizafy's eldest son, once told me something very close to this. Within the *fokontany* of Betafo itself (that is, the eastern part of the territory), he said, possession of Ravatomaina makes his family the ultimate moral authority. If anyone there does evil, it is their responsibility to punish them by depriving them of rice. He wasn't able to produce any cases in which they had actually done so, but it is certainly significant that he would make the claim.

55. Aside from Ratsizafy and his sons, the only other person who definitely used him in curing was Rakoto; though it is possible that some of Ratsizafy's more distant acolytes might have on occasion.

56. Richardson's dictionary (1885:267) glosses *manitsaka* "to trample upon, to spurn, to despise"—as witches, for instance, are said to do when they dance on tombs at night.

57. Or, by saying it was the *mainty* ancestor who enforced this, it is, like the *fady* forbidding Rainitamaina's descendants to marry *andriana*, a way of taking responsibility themselves for rules imposed on them already, so that the rule cannot serve to mark their lower status.

58. Indeed, the two are linked, since proper Malagasy houses should be oriented with their doors and main windows to the west—and in the countryside, most are—so houses in Morafeno literally do look over houses in Belanitra, to its west, in a way that those in Belanitra do not look over those in Morafeno.

59. This approach is in some ways analoguous to the one a psychoanalyst might take, but I am not assuming that Ratsizafy's behavior, or anyone else's, is determined by childhood experience, rather, the process of molding a person continues throughout one's life, and childhood orientations have little long-term effects unless reinforced by ongoing circumstances.

60. If not a symbol for royal power, he remarks, it often becomes the symbol of that of the supreme God, the one thing that surpasses them.

61. Below this is an ambiguous domain of ancestors, ghosts, *Vazimba*, and various forms of displaced intentionality, where it is not entirely clear the degree to which moral accountability can or cannot be applied. Opinions and attitudes seem to differ greatly. Some certainly seemed to feel that, say, *Vazimba* could be considered good or evil, but ancestors were much more troubling . . .

62. This was probably the reason Ratsizafy later thought better of having told it to me, an unknown *Vazaha* who he would have naturally assumed to be a devout Christian, and then switched to insisting on his Christian piety the next time I spoke to him.

63. In fact it was a testament to Ratsizafy's authority as astrologer that his views were taken seriously at all—that he could even have a small school of followers who had studied with him.

64. All but Ingahy Volo at Antongana, whose ancestry he never specified.

65. In fact, the only real violence and indignities anyone suffers in his stories is he, at the hands of his mother.

10. It Must Have Gone Something Like This

1. On the other hand, knowing something does not mean someone necessarily cares. Most *andriana*, for instance, believed the ancestor buried on *tampon-tanana* was named Andrianamboninolona; when once or twice I would point out the name on the tomb was Andrianambololona, that of a later descendant, this never inspired any great interest or surprise.

The important thing was the tomb still demonstrated their membership in the order of the Andrianamboninolona; aside from that, details were irrelevant.

2. Though I strongly suspect they would have if I had been living there.

3. I have been trying to paraphrase the Malagasy idiom as much as possible in this summary: I have much of the conversation on tape.

4. The passage is quoted in full in chapter 1.

5. I realize that I am using the words "story" and "narrative" in two ways, in different parts of the book. Sometimes I apply a very strict definition ("narratives are descriptions of action which attempt to hold the audience's attention because of their desire to know what happens in the end"); at others, I use it in the normal colloquial sense. There seems no way to avoid this other than inventing some new term to substitute for the colloquial usage.

6. Though the quotation in chapter 4 about the snakes at the spring might be taken as an exception.

7. Particularly if it was an area already intrinsically hedged with doubt. Though I might add that this was the real measure of distance; if she really had been an active member of the community, the reality-effects of these stories would have become very relevant indeed, since they would represent concrete dangers.

8. Aside from them, their best friends and informants were Rakoto and his wife Flo.

9. I sat through any number of such conversations during the time I was in Madagascar, more often, actually, among members of Armand's family than Miadana's. Such discussions vary largely in the degree to which they oriented toward simple assessment, and planning an appropriate response—though there was always at least some element of both.

10. The other most visible measure of such trust was the circulation of food: who one would feel safe enough to share a meal with, whose gifts of food one would feel it safe to eat.

11. Probably I should also include a principle of moral judgment, here, as well: though this is sometimes so implicit it is hard to prove that it is definitely there. Other times of course it is very prominent.

12. The resulting narrative does not have to conform to any of the models I proposed (suspense, mystery, reversal) because the narrative itself does not have to be intrinsically interesting or dramatic; it is the process of coming up with it, if anything, that has the structure of an interesting mystery. Remember I was not laying out an outline of all possible types of narrative but rather how one can make a narrative interesting to someone who does not necessarily have any intrinsic interest in the subject matter.

II. Catastrophe

1. Figures are based on the parish records of 1929. My exact count: in all the eastern *fokontany* contained 60 households with 245 people; 49 houses containing 198 people consist of *andriana*, 10 houses with 47 people consist of *mainty*, and there is one household (Ranaivo's) made up of both. These figures contain a fair amount of guesswork however. I note that the picture might have been slightly less stark because it does not include Catholics, and *mainty* were somewhat more likely to be Catholic. Still, most Catholic *mainty* lived in the western part of the territory at the time. (No doubt there were many more who were not recorded, because though their tombs were there, they could only live in Betafo at most a few months of the year.)

2. Total: 39 houses, 186 people; 25 houses with 115 people were *andriana*; 14 houses with 71 people were *mainty*.

3. According to some accounts, no one had dared perform a *famadihana* there since; though Augustin assured me there had also been one in 1954 or 1955.

4. This was also the year in which Rakotonarivo also sponsored a celebration honoring the 100th anniversary of the founding of Betafo's Protestant church, so this might have been part of the occasion for the great rebuilding, though no one I knew associated the two.

5. Rabelohataona, one of the three brothers—the one who according to Armand had kept an *ody havandra*—did leave something of a legacy: his son Andre married a cousin from Ambaribe and remained in Betafo, though he has left Andrianony and moved across the fields to a new settlement of his own foundation, called Tsarahonenana.

6. In 1961, Ratsizafy was married to a *mainty* woman originally from Antsahamasina, named Rasoavahiny. The union was infertile and they seem to have separated a few years later. In 1990 she was still alive, in her native village of Antanety; she and Ratsizafy were still on very friendly terms.

7. I might remark that these are not simply stretches of fields owned by these people during their lifetimes, which have since been handed down to their descendants—to the contrary, AKTA records show that when the Rakoto in question died, in 1920, the inheritance consisted of a mere seven *vala*, and the adjoining fields were owned by completely unrelated people. This is again an illustration of the flexibility of landholding: the contiguous fields seem to have been gathered together by their descendants, by sale, exchange, and adjustment of overlapping claims, in order to create a patrimony ex post facto.

8. Adoption of fosterage is usually referred to by the expression *taiza,* which also means "nursing" or "nurturing"; Ratsizafy's relation with his wife's other children was one of *taiza* in many senses of the word, since they were also of course included in his broader entourage of clients, all of whom were also called his "fosterlings" and, most importantly, because he provided them with a living.

9. Obviously, from Razanajohary's point of view, the arrangement was nothing if not advantageous. It allowed her to keep five of her six children around her, on a patrimony so meager it would probably not have been able to support one or two. In fact, it is instructive in fact to compare her success with the fate of the other group, the Terad-Rakoto, who owned the fields in the northern part of the same valley, and who, despite the fact they had almost twice as much good rice land, managed to keep very few descendants on their ancestral lands.

10. Wealthy and respectable men, their prominence must have been enormously increased by the fact that their two sisters both married very prominent men. Raketabola, the older of the two, married Raoelizaka, and remained for a long time the only resident of *tampon-tanana.* (Her son by an earlier marriage, Rakotoson, had been *President Fokontany* for years, until he died and Augustin took over in 1975.) The younger sister was the last of Rakotonarivo Auguste's three wives; she was the one living with him in his mansion when the roof collapsed, and he spent the last years of his life with her family in Belanitra.

11. Rabe even married one of Razanajohary's daughters by an earlier marriage, putting him in effect in Ratsizafy's family. Many of their descendants worked for Ratsizafy too, from time to time, but he never became their patron in the same sense as he did for his wife's own descendants; as a result, the vast majority eventually wandered away.

In fact, while I was there, the only descendants of this family still living in Betafo were Desi (a child of Rabe's first marriage) and three daughters of Rabe's final marriage, who were also, through their mother, descendants of Rakotovazaha.

12. Date got by comparing Rakotonarivo's account with AKTA documents. Nowadays, black people in Betafo—that is, most of the people who actually live nearby—almost

always refer to it as "Ratsizafy's wife's tomb." Its present handsome appearance has much to do with Ratsizafy's patronage.

13. Actually, in both cases the principle "owners" were said to be people now living far out west; they were however considered the local owners, in part because they were local people who had most recently had a member of their family buried in that tomb.

14. Armand, for instance, told me his ancestor had cursed Andriamaharo's descendants, which was why so few of them were left. Even Augustin, who tried his best to soft-pedal any ongoing bad feelings between the *andriana* and his own family, did allow that Andriamaharo's descendants were an exception: they alone were forbidden to receive his ancestor's body during *famadihana*.

15. If there was any initial hesitation, too, matters were probably sealed in 1970, when one of the most prominent Ambohimasina women married to the most prominent member of the Antsahasoa group—Rajaona, the current *President Fokontany* (#9).

16. Dada Leva was in fact married to an *andriana* woman originally from Anosy.

17. On a smaller scale, little stories of mystery and discovery became the points at which political turns or re-alignments were given moral meaning. Mariel told me how her neighbor Desi had once been a regular client of Ratsizafy, who had encouraged him to get into the shovel business. "It used to be almost every day," she said, "he was going down to Ratsizafy's getting medicine." But then, later, Desi had a falling-out with his father Rabe, who was even closer to the Ingahibe. Shortly thereafter, Desi showed up as usual and Ratsizafy gave him some pieces of wood and told him to wrap it in a black cloth and bury it to the south of his house. He did as he was told, but shortly afterward when he went there for medicine

> Mariel: "Here," said Ratsizafy, "take this thing and wrap it well, then bury it to the south of your house." He had him wrap it in an evil cloth—a black cloth. Desi truly didn't suspect a thing—because you know, he'd been going there for a long time, and whatever he did it was always fine, it always helped him. So he took the medicine and found a little piece of black cloth and wrapped it in that and buried it.

Mariel ended with a note of cynicism: the man was so naive Ratsizafy had him bewitching his own self! In fact, the story is a beautiful example of the ambiguities involved in all political action. Did Ratsizafy chose a black cloth in order to send a message, to intimidate Desi, or break off their relationship? That is, did he select a black cloth to attack Desi, to imply that he might be doing so, or was this simply the color cloth that was astrologically appropriate? Was Desi really so innocently trusting, or was he already full of unarticulated suspicions about Ratsizafy's real intentions—suspicions that, once he had broken with his father, suddenly became concretized in the image of a mysterious object wrapped in black?

Once it had happened, at any rate, the story became took its permanent form: a little story of reversal, or betrayal of trust, that can perhaps continue to circulate as either a comment of Ratsizafy, or a cautionary tale on the wiles of astrologers.

18. While I was living there he was mostly to be seen directing workmen who were building a large brick building right in the middle of the marketplace, next to the Protestant church, or else, inspecting some of his innumerable blue Renault vans in the adjoining taxi-stand.

19. In practice, the main thing that distinguished them from *Vazimba* was that they were never said haunt places close to human habitation; they were always creatures of the

wilderness, living in distant mountain pools, lakes in the forest, swamps in wastelands far away.

20. Parson, for example, had heard they tended to demand all sorts of difficult and exotic foods from those that kept them: for instance, they would eat only expensive fruits and drink only pure water taken from springs in the Ankaratra mountains, the highest in Madagascar, many miles to the south.

21. Rakoto kept shifting back and forth from singular to plural forms even in this one narrative, as if it were impossible to say whether it was an individual or ghostly collectivity.

22. In fact, *Kalanoro* stories are almost exactly the same as stories about *Vazimba* in underwater pools; the only difference really is a single reversal of terms. *Vazimba* draw human beings into their hidden homes under the water; *Kalanoro* come out of the water to hide themselves in the homes of their human companions. The ultimate results also different, though, since in one case, the human becomes a medium (who is visited by distant spirits) and in the other, the spirit itself goes out to steal things for him.

23. I have no idea how they did it. It seems unlikely they arranged things in advance with the proprietors. More likely it was some kind of sleight of hand.

24. Manambe's situation at the time might also be seen as a example of another pattern I discussed in chapter 7: he was a self-made man in the middle of his life, who had been tied up in the cash economy, playing around perhaps with medicine or other dubious matters, but was now at the point of raising a family (he had two sons) and translating his wealth into some kind of publicly acceptable, moral, ancestral authority.

25. His father Rabera, remember, was married to the *tampon-tanana* heiress Razafisoa.

26. The district of Arivonimamo prides itself on never having voted to reelect a standing president, but in the local elections that follow the national ones, voters tend to be more practical and less expressive.

27. This was the time Augustin was being referred as Ikoto Prez, "Kid President." Dahy Rainbe (1988:134) makes the interesting point that in the colonial period, rural communities often elected young men rather than venerable elders to official positions precisely because made it easier to ignore them.

28. The statement was all the more significant in that, by that time, Augustin had not actually been *President Fokontany* for many years. But of this, more later.

29. In the case of *fokon'olona* decisions, these are usually simply fines; though matters can get much more serious.

30. Miadana and family were still not permanent residents, since Claude was still working part-time in Arivonimamo, and during the school year, they spent most of their time in rooms they rented there.

31. At this time, his two younger brothers, Soanaivo and Little Jean, were still attending school in town. They were equally disowned.

32. The use of this term (*tadio*) was almost certainly a bit exaggerated, but that's the word that people always used. Probably it was just a very unusually strong gust.

33. The one union that had been fertile—that of Razafindramiza and Rakotobe from Avarakady—had not become an issue because the couple had quickly moved away.

In Ratsizafy's case both sides claimed they had been forbidden to marry the other. Armand explained to me that it was all right for Ratsizafy to marry Razanajohary, however, because only her mother was Andrianamboninolona, her father was an *andriana* from elsewhere.

34. *Mangalatra ny razan'olona.* In theory, slaves could not marry free people, *hova* could not marry *andriana*, or *andriana*, in theory, other *andriana* of a higher order. The rules were unevenly enforced.

35. Many suspected they were the main reason for the endless petty thefts.

36. Part of the reason, perhaps, for the similarity was that power here was so much tied up in what is hidden that the very act of constructing a situation of this sort becomes a source of power rather than its outcome.

37. Almost all *andriana*, when describing the tensions in Betafo, would begin by telling me the story of the ordeal—or if not, they would bring it up fairly quickly. Only rarely would they specifically mention Ratsizafy's marriage.

38. One or two people had stayed on even after the fire in 1931, but they were all gone by 1934.

39. Not only the descendants of Rasoavelo 6 Honors, from *tampon-tanana,* but also those of his brother Andrianaivo the Younger, who founded Atsimonkady.

40. This was very rarely. I don't know about the situation in the 1940s or '50s but no wealthy absentee had conducted a *famadihana* at this tomb during the twenty or thirty years before I was there.

41. In fact she was from Mantasoa, the westernmost district of Imerina; there is a colony of Andrianamboninolona established there as well, as documented by Vogel (1979).

42. At least by his wife, Raketabola (b. 1916), originally from Belanitra. He did have an illegitimate son by a woman from Avarakady, who left Betafo, never to return, shortly before his father died in the late 1960s. In 1990 he was station-master of the *gare* in Antananarivo.

43. It was he Miadana was referring to when he said Sely was only number two.

44. He would change the beads and the colors of the cloth depending on whether he was before a *mainty* or *andriana* tomb.

45. One might object that Augustin's own adopted mother Razafisoa was just as much a descendant of Ralaitsivery's brother. Not so, my informants told me: Razafisoa was descended Ranjalahy, who was only a half brother of Ralaitsivery (by Rasoavelo's second wife)—unlike Rasoarivelo who was a sister "from one womb." Anyway this argument would suffice if, like Augustin, you had every reason to rationalize such things.

46. It was a notorious thing that *famadihana* could bring out hidden grievances (*ala-helo,* literally "sadnesses" or "miseries"), though this was normally expected to take the form of drunken brawls between kin during the feasting on the second day.

47. That was what Elizabeth heard one night, that she said sounded almost like the boom of guns or cannon in the distance; several other people told me similar stories, and said they had been very startled by it, though I never heard the sound myself.

48. Myself, I didn't actually see any tears, but I talked to a couple who swore they did. Obviously it didn't really matter; he might as well have been.

12. Epilogue

1. The descriptive approach I've employed, which weaves constantly back and forth between my own accounts and reconstructions, and those of my informants, plays into this as well; whatever one might think of it as an ethnographic style, it does seem appropriate for a book that is largely *about* the construction and circulation of narratives.

2. It is interesting to note that the problem of "knowing the Other" was originally asked not by anthropologists or their critics but by European philosophers, and not about people of other cultures but about anyone at all. The problem is really the legacy of Descartes, who left Western philosophy with assumptions so utterly, radically individualistic

that the very existence of other people—let alone the possibility of knowing anything about them—became profoundly problematic. Any number of philosophers contributed their own proposed solutions to this problem of "the Other" (Theunissen 1984), attempting to prove why it was indeed possible to know that anyone else really existed, engaged in thought, and so on. Sartre, for example, dedicated a large part of *Being and Nothingness* (1966), in which he laid down his basic sociological theory, to just this problem. The term "Other," in fact, appears to have passed into social criticism largely through Sartre's intellectual allies and associates. Simone de Beauvoir (1974), for example, argued in *The Second Sex* that men, in a male-dominated society, tend to define women as a kind of fundamental or perennial Other, which makes it very difficult for women to act as subjects in their own right; Franz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1965), made a rather similar argument about effects of colonialism. Now, both de Beauvoir and Fanon were mainly concerned with what all this means for the victim, but their work opened the way to take a terminology originally developed for describing relations between individuals and adopt it as a way to describe the political relations between groups. Hence in much a lot of contemporary critical writing one finds the old problem of "knowing the Other" transposed, with an abstract being called "Europe," "the West," "the European" (or even "Europe as Subject") striving to define itself in relation to an "Other" which seems to include anyone or everyone else. And while philosophers were usually willing to admit that in the end, one could probably know *something* about other people, on this level, it usually turns out that you can't: the Other always turns out, through various projective mechanisms (usually borrowed from Hegel or psychoanalysis, or both) to be nothing but a shadow-image of one's own self.

In actual practice, when someone accuses an anthropologist—or all anthropologists—of reducing the people they describe to an "Other," what they mean is not quite so grandiose. It is much more about a certain way of writing. Any author has to assume a certain degree of common ground, shared with her audience—certain assumptions about human life and motivations, that which does not need to be explained. When this is combined with an assumption that the ways or attitudes of certain other people cannot be treated this way, that they do need to be explained or otherwise accounted for, then this is what can be called the Other. Of course, stated this way, there is no reason that this has to reflect a relation of dominance: but it's also easy to see how it usually will. A woman, for instance, can write a book for other women, to help them to better understand male psychology, but such a book would be considered a genre book, of specialized interest and not generic knowledge. The universal perspective is, at least in writing, usually assumed to be that of the dominant group. In this sense, speaking of "Othering" definitely does address a legitimate problem, though rather, it seems to me, in the way of putting a sledgehammer to it.

3. I still occasionally find myself using Malagasy terms in sizing up people here in America.

4. Aside, of course, from conveying information.

5. Actually the example in the back of my mind here is that of certain critiques I have heard of Renato Rosaldo's treatment of Ilongot headhunting, but I thought best to leave out the term "headhunting" in order to emphasize that it is not the actual cutting off of heads, but murder, which is objectionable; what one does with the body afterward—cutting off the person's head, or for that matter, eating it—seems to me a mere question of aesthetics (unless, for instance, such acts are done with the intention of terrorizing or traumatizing someone who is still alive). Here, a relativist would be perfectly right to say there is no difference between this and any other killing.

I should probably also add that, given the prior fact of imperialism, there is no doubt that such relativism can have ameliorative effects (as the work of Franz Boas, for instance, undoubtedly did). But this is a different point.

6. If doing so means that we will have to abandon the pretense of doing some sort of science, then I would say that kind of science is probably not worth saving anyway. Of course, many would make the argument it means nothing of the kind.

7. My definition is in part inspired by a definition of history proposed by John Comaroff that "history is the conceptual space, the time of human experience, in which social scientific knowledge—and most of all, prediction—is proven wrong" (in Comaroff and Stern 1994:35). But my formulation is sufficiently different that I doubt he would want to be identified with it.

8. See Comaroff and Comaroff 1990:8–10 for an analogous critique.

9. The doctrine I am describing then is almost exactly the opposite of the way the notion of an unknowable Other is usually invoked. I note too that while I myself would feel distinctly uncomfortable with the prospect of anyone having comprehensive knowledge of my personal, individual mind—I really don't see anything particularly frightening about someone else being able to have encompassing knowledge of my Americanness, my working class origins, my mixed Jewish and German ancestry, my maleness, my avocation as an anthropologist, or any other aspects which are so obviously public and shared with large numbers of other people.

10. In fact, much of the thinking on the nature of *hasina* discussed at various points in the book could be seen as the rudiments of a social theory, to try to put a name on invisible mechanisms by which a consensus between them becomes translated into a power which, as Durkheim noted, seems to have coercive force outside of any individual.

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DAVID GRAEBER

is Lecturer in Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is author of *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology, Direct Action: An Ethnography,* and *Reinventing Revolution.* Active in the anarchist and anti-globalization movements for more than a decade, he has published essays in *The Nation, In These Times, Harper's,* and elsewhere.